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**Irish as Symptom  
Language, Ideology and Praxis in the Post/Colony**

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**Author:** Melanie McMahon

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PH.D. IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE

Irish as Symptom:

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Language, Ideology and Praxis in the Post/Colony

**Melanie Leigh McMahon**

**4/12/2012**

abstract

Within popular culture and academic scholarship alike, a standard narrative exists about the rightful (non-)place of the Irish language in post/colonial society. It is a tautological narrative because the apparent unfitness of Irish for the exigencies of postmodern life both explains its disappearance and prevents its full revival (i.e., Irish is outmoded because it is outmoded). That Irish requires costly government expenditures to stabilize it only confirms its inherent infirmity. Yet the 'problem' of indigenous language is not so neatly resolved, especially as it threatens to erupt, symptom-like, in unexpected (i.e., Anglophone) contexts. The usual post/colonial paradigms cannot fully account for the disjunctive position of Irish. Critical theory, on the other hand, offers a way to think the striking disconnect between the constitutional fact of Irish as the 'first official language,' for example, and the reality that almost no one speaks it. Lacan called this type of disconnect a symptom. 'Symptomal torsions' are everywhere evident in the Republic: from bilingual road signs to the near total displacement of the language onto reluctant school-children. Such measures guarantee that Irish will not be spoken in the more unruly space of the streets. The containment of Irish alongside its official valorisation makes certain that it (and the associated 'barbarism' of the pre-colonial past) cannot return in unforeseen ways. Yet return it does; all the cultural products analysed in the dissertation have some relationship to this return of the linguistic repressed. Each text highlights the fraught interface between the indigenous language and its imperial replacement, in both the North and the Republic. They may be humorous and satirical, as in the short films of Daniel O'Hara, or they may be resistant and political, as in the H-Block oral testimonies. They may be eulogistic, as with Brian Friel's language play, *Translations*, or they may be more recognisably post/colonial, as in the essays of native intellectuals explaining their choice of English over the 'mother tongue'. This research draws on textual analyses along with (analytic and continental) philosophies of language. It constructs a methodology based on close readings of literary, filmic, and archival texts through various modes of critical theory. By examining the ways in which these texts both converge and diverge, this research elucidates those intersections between language, power, and the colonial legacy that would otherwise remain obscure.

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'Of Scatology and Eschatology in a Northern Irish Prison', *Critical Inquiry*, (corrected manuscript under final review).

I am grateful to the editors of these journals for their support and for giving me the opportunity to publish these essays. Finally, and most especially, I am grateful to my boys, Terry and Liam.

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## Notes on the Tongueless Native: An Introduction

### i.

In *Foe*, J. M. Coetzee's reworking of the story of Robinson Crusoe, the slave Friday does not speak. In this revised version, the narrator is an Englishwoman, Susan Barton, who is also cast away, though some fifteen years after the other two, who have long since established a presence on the island. Indeed, Cruso (Coetzee's spelling) and Friday have remade the face of the landscape through elaborate terracing, despite the fact that there are no seeds to plant. Susan Barton assumes that Friday is simple, because while he responds to various order-words in English, he never replies. 'Is Friday an imbecile incapable of speech?', she finally asks. In answer to her question, Cruso commands Friday to open his mouth and motions for Susan to look inside. She peers into the black maw, but she does not look closely we later learn, for fear of what she might see: "It is too dark," said I. "La-la-la," said Cruso. "Ha-ha-ha," said Friday. I drew away, and Cruso released Friday's hair. "He has no tongue," he said. "That is why he does not speak. They cut out his tongue".<sup>1</sup>

An analysis of a South African novelist reading Daniel Defoe may seem an unlikely starting point from which to introduce a dissertation about the ideological implications of the erosion of indigenous language in Ireland. Yet the steady disappearance of language provides an apt metonym for the colonial transformations that bear on no one colony exclusively, but are detectable to varying degrees in each. The eclipse and ultimate erasure of indigenous language and its replacement (in this case) by English is not a process unique to Ireland any more than it is to South Africa. Ireland will possess unusually exacerbated symptoms of language shift and language death, however, because it is both the oldest *and* the most contemporary colony. Partly due to the sheer duration of colonisation and partly due to the codified and systematic attempts to quash its use, Ireland is also among those colonies with the most thoroughly eroded indigenous languages. Despite official government support, *Gaeltacht* (or Irish-speaking area) is a classification that must be understood loosely, for though Irish is sometimes in use there, it is rarely at the expense of English. The infirmity of the living language is often linked to the magnitude of excess mortality during the Famine decade—roughly 1845-1852, though with demographic consequences continuing well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century—which succeeded in decimating the last of its speakers. Over one million deaths were accompanied by the widespread dispersal and displacement of over one million more by way of emigration. With characteristic lyricism, David Lloyd describes the 'terrible silence of the land' following the years of Famine on which almost all contemporary observers remarked: 'The silence is at once the silence of depopulation and the silence of a traumatized culture . . . It would seem as if the enclosure of those vestiges of the commons that sustained the space of Irish orality, together with the traumatic catastrophe of the Famine that brutally consolidated the transformation, led also to the closing of that most labile orifice, the Irish mouth'.<sup>2</sup> Late colonial Ireland approaches a state of 'speechlessness' not unlike that of the mute Friday.

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<sup>1</sup> J.M. Coetzee, *Foe* (London: Penguin, 2010, 1986c), 22-3.

<sup>2</sup> Lloyd, David. *Irish Culture and Colonial Modernity: The Transformation of Oral Space* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2011), 86. Lloyd writes, "That the moment of the Famine is generally regarded as that of the final and irrevocable demise of the Irish language is only one index of the ensuing assault on what had become an oral culture. Although it is possible to account for that demise in terms of the mass emigrations that took place mostly from predominantly Irish-speaking areas, or in relation to the pragmatic realisation of those who remained that their children's survival depended on proficiency in English, there is little doubt as to the equal impact of the post-Famine traumatising of a whole culture on the loss of the language". Ibid., 60.

The operating presumption of almost all post/colonial studies, meanwhile, is that ‘speechlessness’ is a misplaced designation because English (a language after all) is available to be indigenised. There is even something considered subversive, rather than simply aphasic, regarding the mastery of the imperial replacement language. For example, the most pertinent inter-textual counterpart to Coetzee’s Friday would be the author of the famous slave narrative, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African*. Olaudah Equiano educates himself, buys his own freedom, and publishes his story in elaborate and eloquent English, to both wide acclaim and considerable fortune. The renowned Nigerian novelist, Chinua Achebe, cites Equiano’s autobiography as an early ideal of African literature. Whether or not the embrace of English is indeed the most appropriate resolution to the problem of indigenous language death is less interesting perhaps than the haste and anxiety with which some assert it as the only one possible. The foundational text *The Empire Writes Back* is, in its entirety, premised on the prior assumption of the desirability of global English, so long as it is English with a small ‘e’, hence such statements as the following: ‘Though British imperialism resulted in the spread of a language, English, across the globe, the english of Jamaicans is not the english of Canadians, Maoris, or Kenyans’.<sup>3</sup> Why this is proof of the debility of colonialism rather than its culmination is never addressed. Its authors begin the discussion from the late point at which a hypothetical Friday has already learned to write in English, become a master of it, and even been recognised as an innovator by those to whom it originally ‘belonged’. This work, by contrast, seeks to explore what is at stake in the twin movements of the burial of Irish and the elevation of English in the post/colonial condition. I will ultimately argue that the eclipse of Irish is an index by which to measure the eclipse of former life-ways. The disavowal of alternative socialities is not accidental to the occlusion of the Irish language, in other words, but is rather its objective. By the same token, the often charged effect of the unanticipated Irish speech act in an Anglophone context marks the extent to which the return of the linguistic repressed may burden and interrupt the power dispensation of the post-partition state, providing a new site for expressly transformative goals.

As Walter Benjamin would say, and David Lloyd in the Irish context, in ignoring the claims of our ‘enslaved ancestors’ upon our living memories, we repeat the violence that ‘judged the dead dispensable’<sup>4</sup> as well as benefit from their erasure. What, then, are the political implications of a ‘dead’ language as it ‘returns’ to disorder post/colonial capitalist social relations? Can there be a ‘subjunctive’ politics—that is, one which begins not from what is, but from what might have been—one which proceeds from the starting point of what might yet be done to ‘redeem’ Benjamin’s ‘generations of the downtrodden’, such as the Famine dead?

The English language and the discourse of identity often accompany one another. This dissertation addresses questions of linguistic resistance by both deconstructing this standard (Anglophone, identarian) paradigm as well as sketching alternative praxes as they appear, sometimes fleetingly and fragmentarily, in texts and settings from late colonial to post-colonial Ireland. I also interrogate the reactive ideologies that would confine the Irish-speaking body to the manageable space of the schoolroom, the unread street-sign or the benign phraseology of the civil servant. I make use of Coetzee’s post/colonial allegory in this introduction because it vividly situates several aspects of the dissertation that bear directly on language.

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<sup>3</sup> Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (New York ; London: Routledge, 2003), 8.

<sup>4</sup> David Lloyd, ‘The Indigent Sublime: Spectres of Irish Hunger’ in *Irish Times: Temporalities of Modernity* (Dublin: Field Day in association with University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), 40.



Firstly, he underscores violence—grisly, unrelieved violence—in such a way that it becomes impossible to assume that a future Friday simply developed a preference for English. For though a tongueless slave may eventually acquire English, it would be the height of sophistry to assume the choice was freely made.<sup>5</sup> Secondly, by dramatising its obverse, Coetzee manages to highlight the centrality of the speaking subject to the (re-)production of colonial capitalist social relations: the mute slave in London becomes a spanner-in-the-works. He produces a kind of gravitational void around which the speaking characters revolve, contorting them-selves to account for his silence as they would before the curve of reality or in the presence of a black hole. By illustrating the significance of the speaking subject to social reproduction, Coetzee delimits a space of intervention so concentrated in both its necessity and its fragility as to make it an ideal site for the interruption of Anglophone business-as-usual. Finally, in a related way, he demonstrates the total dependence of the centred subject upon language. The subject is an unavoidably linguistic construct, or as Jean-Jacques Lecercle writes, ‘A subject is . . . the result of an accumulation of speech acts . . . made up of sedimented interpellation[s]’.<sup>6</sup> Subject formation is utterly reliant on language; it cannot proceed without it. In that sense, Friday holds forth as a *non-subject*, hesitating before the precipice of the Symbolic order in a way that never ceases to disconcert those around him. Coetzee duly magnifies the other side of such resistance, outlining the various social impediments that would ‘forbid’ such anti-identarian projects—the fear of becoming-monstrous, for example, since proof of monstrosity would suggest the coloniser had been right all along. This dissertation traces the tension between the desire to seize the missed opportunity to redeem the traumas of the past, and the ideology that would make such revolutionary redress appear pointless, impossible, or nostalgic.

## ii.

Tony Crowley is the most prolific historian of the fortunes of the Irish language, chronicling its decline (along with its occasional, temporary resurgences) from the first legislative efforts to eradicate it with the Statutes of Kilkenny (1366) to its ambivalent status in the contemporary Republic. Its contentious usage in the North is also well documented in his work. He describes the push and pull of various constituencies, conflicts and revival efforts in regard to the language, but a certain ineluctable feature of hindsight seems to guide his work. The marginalisation of Irish is largely inevitable, its revival as a living language unrealistic, and most people concerned are indifferent (if not outright hostile) to it anyhow. The best that could ever have been hoped for in the face of the overwhelming fact of English is a certain supplemental Irish—for either scholarly or identarian purposes in accord with Douglas Hyde’s very moderate vision. Crowley argues that the attempt of some nationalists to impose Irish on a reluctant population would have amounted to an (implicitly fascist) state

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<sup>5</sup> Against Ngugi, Achebe argues that (Kenyans and) Nigerians clamoured for and desired English, hence what appears to be colonial imposition is actually the response to proliferating demand. This dissertation argues against such simplifications. Achebe writes, ‘Inconvenient though it may be, the scenario before us here is of imperialist agents (in the shape of Scottish missionaries) desiring to teach Kikuyu children in their mother tongue, while the patriotic Kikuyu peasants are revolting and breaking away because they prefer English! . . . In Nigeria, the demand for English was already there in the coastal regions as early as the first half of the nineteenth century. . . . Nowhere in all this can we see the slightest evidence of the simple scenario painted by Ngugi of European imperialism forcing its language down the throats of unwilling natives.’ See Achebe’s *Education of a British-Protected Child* (London: Penguin, 2009), especially ‘Politics and Politicians of Language in African Literature’.

<sup>6</sup> Jean-Jacques Lecercle, *Interpretation as Pragmatics* (New York : St. Martin’s Press, 1999), 166.

of ‘monoglossia.’ He observes that ‘the English language [is] the sole medium of communication [of] the vast majority of the population.’<sup>7</sup> Because this was the ostensible ‘choice’ of the Irish people it has been accepted in the spirit of democracy. He even suggests that a commitment to indigenous language over the imperial language amounts to an ethic of ‘purity’ that easily slips into totalitarianism. (Similarly, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o is accused of ‘ethnic chauvinism’ when he argues for the abandonment of English in support of his indigenous Gikuyu). By pronouncing on Irish indifference, which he supports with survey feedback confirming that indeed most people have ‘rather negative views about the way Irish has been taught in school . . . [and] a low or “lukewarm” personal commitment to its use,’ he ends up, like many historians of his ilk, confusing cause with effect. He quotes, ‘The average person has not sufficient ability in the language to converse freely in it’ and that she feels ‘it is not very suitable to modern life’.<sup>8</sup> Schoolchildren intuit that a language which is not spoken is not a language, and thus educational Irish may become a frustrating exercise in social futility. But by inverting cause and effect, Crowley also overlooks the possibility that people become ‘resigned’ *in response* to their language ceasing to function as such. The automatic attribution of anterior indifference as the cause of language decline does not make sense, though Declan Kiberd makes a similar error, which I discuss in Chapter One. As Pierre Bourdieu makes clear, indigenous populations, or ‘holders of dominated linguistic competences’ only ‘collaborate in the destruction of their instruments of expression’<sup>9</sup> as a result of accumulated indignities and convulsive historical disruption. Indifference, I argue, is the demoralised result of violence.

For his part, Coetzee, lingers over violence the better to make its presence manifest. Partly due to its unknowability and partly due to lurid fascination, Susan Barton ruminates often on Friday’s cut tongue. She fixates on the culprit (Was it the slavers? Or Crusoe himself?), the gruesome act, and the details of its execution:

Did Crusoe bind you hand and foot and force a block of wood between your teeth and then hack out your tongue? . . . Did Crusoe cut out your tongue while you were insensible? But how did he staunch the bleeding stump? Why did you not choke on your blood? Unless your tongue was not cut off but merely split, with a cut as neat as a surgeon’s, that drew little blood yet made speech ever afterward impossible. Or let us say the sinews that move the tongue were cut and not the tongue itself, the sinews at the base of the tongue.<sup>10</sup>

Coetzee suggests that while it may have been a ‘painless’ ‘surgical’ operation—with careful incisions applied to avoid an excess of bloodletting—the effects of speechlessness remain the same. In fact, it makes no difference how the violence was deployed: in relative quiet or spectacular struggle. Yet Coetzee’s consistent use of graphic imagery discourages any presumptions about the benign inevitability of indigenous language loss. Benign inevitability is consistent with most post/colonial logic regarding language obsolescence; it assumes that though the imposition of imperial language was originally invasive and divisive, it remains nevertheless a gift. Douglas Hyde points out this sentiment in his famous speech, ‘On the Necessity for De-Anglicising Ireland’ where he writes, ‘I have often heard people thank God that if the English gave us nothing else they gave us at

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<sup>7</sup> Tony Crowley, *The Politics of Language in Ireland 1366-1922: A Sourcebook* (London: Routledge, 2000), 6.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>9</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, trans. Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson (New York: Polity Press, 1991), 49.

<sup>10</sup> Coetzee, *Foe*, 84-5.

least their language'.<sup>11</sup> He does not so much argue with this assertion as attempt to show that Irish is 'worth knowing too' or so say German (and French and Italian) philologists. English is indeed a gift, but the 'educated Irishman' should learn Irish too, in the same sense that 'it would be . . . disgraceful . . . for an educated Jew to be quite ignorant of Hebrew'.<sup>12</sup> Indigenous languages that are relegated to a space of gentrified cultural capital in this way are thereby 'preserved', but they cease to be spoken as living languages. Indeed the intellectualisation of an indigenous language often guarantees that it is no longer spoken by the peasantry, so that its erosion (and paradoxical 'preservation') mirrors the marginalisation of those who historically would have spoken it.

Meanwhile, a unifying global English partakes of what Pierre Bourdieu calls the 'illusion of linguistic communism' in which language is like a 'treasure trove' and participation in it is almost 'mystical.' Such 'mysticism' is apparent in much of the work on global Englishes, such as Bill Ashcroft's recent book, *Caliban's Voice*, which aims explicitly to 'celebrate the inventiveness, strength and power of writing [in English] from post-colonized cultures'.<sup>13</sup> The dream of a globalised language exalts the creativity of 'variations' of English without acknowledging the widespread linguistic effacements on which it is predicated. Bourdieu implies that such reveries as Comte's in the following quotation obscure the question of (colonial) violence behind a veneer of infinite linguistic democratisation: 'Language forms a kind of wealth,' Comte writes, 'which all can make use of at once without causing any diminution of the store, and which thus admits a complete community of enjoyment; for all, freely participating in the general treasure, unconsciously aid in its preservation'. Bourdieu accuses Comte of thus 'resolv[ing] the question of the social and economic conditions of the appropriation of language without ever having to raise it'.<sup>14</sup>

In some respects, the disavowal of violence is also effectuated by the ascription of 'choice,' since violence perhaps would be the opposite of choice. Douglas Hyde urges his listeners to *choose* to supplement their educations with the legitimately scholarly Irish language. More frequently, however, the post/colonial intellectual 'chooses' English, though it is of course, an 'indigenised' English. For Bill Ashcroft, language is the instrument of representation and one must choose which language most faithfully represents one's world. Such a scenario relies upon an agent who exists prior to language, one who assesses the extent to which this language or that one corresponds to her pre-existent desires, and makes the choice accordingly. (Ngugi likewise chooses, though in a manner of recalcitrance; I discuss his linguistic strategies more fully in Chapter Six.) We find glimpses of Bourdieu's linguistic communism in Ashcroft's affirmation of common ownership: 'For if language seems to represent "us" because it is "ours", what of a colonial language? It is not exactly "ours" but it is not exclusively "theirs" either. It is "ours" because we make it "ours" and when we do so we choose to identify ourselves in a particularly contested, a particularly ambivalent space'.<sup>15</sup> Ashcroft employs active verbs such as 'make', 'choose' and 'identify' in order to confer upon the agent the extra-linguistic relation to language that metaphysical realism requires. At other times, English is presented as a kind of foreknowledge, a choice-which-is-not-one, or perhaps, a choice already made, hence Chinua Achebe's well-known utterance: 'But for me there

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<sup>11</sup> Douglas Hyde, 'On the Necessity for De-Anglicising Ireland', in *An Irish Literature Reader: Poetry, Prose, Drama*, eds. Maureen O'Rourke Murphy and James MacKillop (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2006), 146.

<sup>12</sup> Hyde, 'On the Necessity', 148.

<sup>13</sup> Bill Ashcroft, *Caliban's Voice: the Transformation of English in Postcolonial Literatures* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2009), 15.

<sup>14</sup> Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, 43.

<sup>15</sup> Ashcroft, *Caliban's Voice*, 96.

is no other choice. I have been given this language, and I intend to use it'.<sup>16</sup> Chapter Six involves a closer look at the justifications for the use of English by native intellectuals and the terms by which they stage or dramatise the choice.

Decisionism is a natural outgrowth of the tradition of metaphysical realism on which most literary criticism rests. Metaphysical realism 'presupposes an ultimately knowable "ready-made world" which pre-exists our descriptions of it'. It is a set of assumptions that project a 'fixed totality of mind-independent objects . . . [in which] truth involves some sort of correspondence relation between words or thought-signs and external things and sets of things'.<sup>17</sup> Ashcroft declares, from within this tradition, that it would be 'profoundly erroneous' to argue 'that language *embodies* cultural meaning rather than represents it'.<sup>18</sup> If language reflects what is already there, instead of actively constructing it—that is, if the subject and the world pre-exist language, rather than emerge as its effects—then it should be quite irrelevant whether one speaks Irish, speaks English, or speaks not at all (since 'Friday is Friday'<sup>19</sup> and so on). To put it another way, if the subject is constituted prior to language, *then she abides*, fundamentally unchanging over time, no matter what language she is speaking, i.e., indigenous, imperial, an indigenised version of the imperial, a hybridised dialect, etc. As Owen/Roland says in Brian Friel's play, analysed in Chapter Three, on the difference between being called an Irish name and an English one: 'It's still the same me, isn't it?'. Even if we assume that identity is fluid, unfinished, or 'de-centred', it is still used in precisely the same ways as it has since Descartes—as a core of self-transparent volition, actively involved in securing its own truth or certainty. In other words, the affirmed fragmentation of the subject has not dislodged the very notion as untenable, so much as it has merely caused it to bear slightly blurrier boundaries, while functioning in exactly the same manner. Lacan refers to the Cartesian fallacy in terms of a 'homunculus', a 'little fellow' inside me who steers the vessel of my body.<sup>20</sup>

Rorty locates the onto-theological hold-over of metaphysical realism in the discourse of the subject. He writes, 'The history of modern philosophy has centred on attempts to preserve an enclave of nonmechanism, and thus to keep alive the notion of a "true self" and the plausibility of a morality of self-purification'.<sup>21</sup> He goes on to argue that Descartes wanted to preserve the Platonist and Christian conception of the mind's access to certainty in terms of 'immediate, nondiscursive grasp of truth'. He writes, 'The result of Descartes' and later Kant's "still smaller and more mysterious enclave of nonmechanism" was . . . the invention of "the individual"—a moral self who existed "prior to and apart from all roles," who was independent of any social or historical context'.<sup>22</sup> Like the subject of late (anti-) colonial identity, 'to say that the moral self exists apart from all roles means that it will remain the same no matter what situation it finds itself in, no matter what language it uses to create its self-image, no matter what its vocabulary of moral deliberation may be'. The only character that matters, Rorty argues, is the one it already has.<sup>23</sup> If the true self, 'identity', is already there—if it requires only developing, nurturing, and expressing—what need is there for a post/colonial politics? If the thing that

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<sup>16</sup> Quoted in Crowley, *Language in History: Theories and Texts* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 50.

<sup>17</sup> Hilary Putnam, *Reason, truth and history* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1981), 49.

<sup>18</sup> Ashcroft, *Caliban's Voice*, 14; original emphasis.

<sup>19</sup> Coetzee, *Foe*, 122.

<sup>20</sup> He writes, 'I will pinpoint the function of the Cartesian *cogito* by the term monster or homunculus'. See Jacques Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (London: Karnac, 2004), 141.

<sup>21</sup> Richard Rorty, 'Freud and Moral Reflection' in *Essays on Heidegger and others* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991), 155.

<sup>22</sup> Rorty quoting Alisdair MacIntyre, 'Freud and Moral Reflection', 157.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

counts is *what I already have*, than there is no impetus to strategise redress for past violence. As I suggest in Chapter Six, it is as if no violence, no violation, had taken place, since what counted all along (my identity) survives intact. Truer than what colonialism destroyed, it is properly inaccessible to the probing coloniser and anti-colonialist alike; truer because ‘for Locke, Berkeley and Hume, no less than for Descartes, mind is better known than body in the sense that the internal is more certain than the external, the private is prior to the public’.<sup>24</sup> Yet as Wittgenstein shows, the opposite is the case: the internal is the ‘place’ most subject to interminable slippage and thus infinite regress. Knowledge cannot be arrived at without language and language can establish nothing (or even *be* language) without inter-subjective criterion of correctness. The inherent structure of address of all language presupposes at least one other person. Lacan uses this to wield a critique of the *cogito* by recalling the fact that Descartes must *tell us* of the ‘I think’. That Descartes ‘can formulate it only be *saying* it to us, implicitly—[is] a fact he forgets’.<sup>25</sup>

Because the *cogito* is a linguistic construct, it has to pass through the vicissitudes and lacerations of language *before* the possibility of the unity and certainty Descartes seeks. But of course because it must pass through language, so is it guaranteed that those things (unity and certainty) will *never arrive*. Similarly, it is by way of the private language argument that Wittgenstein most succinctly demonstrates the impossibility of a stable subjective core. It is thus in a sort of Wittgensteinian irony that Foe utters these words to Susan in order to assuage her existential doubt:

The trick I have learned is to plant a sign or marker in the ground where I stand, so that in my future wanderings I shall have something to return to, and not get worse lost than I am. Having planted it, I press on; the more often I come back to the mark (which is a sign of my blindness and incapacity), the more certainly I know I am lost, yet the more I am heartened too, to have found my way back.<sup>26</sup>

Wittgenstein’s private language argument bears a similar structure to this dropping of metaphysical breadcrumbs, while expounding upon the inevitability of failure.<sup>27</sup> Wittgenstein designs a thought experiment: a person decides that each time he experiences a particular sensation, he will record the symbol ‘S’ in a special notebook. He feels the sensation, he writes down the ‘S’. If he does so consistently, he reasons, he will have ultimately devised a symbolic system that is meaningful to him alone, since no one else can inhabit his body, feel his sensations, or connect their occurrence with a symbol. He will have developed what is, in effect, a ‘private language’. Anthony Kenny argues in his article ‘Cartesian Privacy’ that ‘If a Cartesian *res cogitans* uses a language it must be a private language in the sense defined by Wittgenstein’.<sup>28</sup> Foe advises Susan Barton to look for ‘tokens’ and return to them again and again until such time as ‘you discover yourself to be saved’.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Anthony Kenny, ‘Cartesian Privacy’, 115.

<sup>25</sup> Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, 36; original emphasis.

<sup>26</sup> Coetzee, *Foe*, 135-6.

<sup>27</sup> Kenny describes the Wittgensteinian problematic thus: ‘[Wittgenstein] is out to establish something about so-called “inner experience,” to break down the Cartesian way of thinking of this, and thus to change in a fundamental way our conception of ourselves. There is an attack on the prevailing philosophical conception of the self implicit in the attack on the possibility of a private language, and it is this which gives the project its importance’. He adds, ‘The “inner facade” which I alone observe is, for Wittgenstein, an illusion’. ‘Cartesian Privacy’, 127.

<sup>28</sup> Kenny, ‘Cartesian Privacy’, 121.

<sup>29</sup> Coetzee, *Foe*, 136.

Foe's parable of Cartesian certainty is self-consciously flawed but nevertheless maintained, as if the mere repetition of its invocation would lend substantiality to its claims.

Yet when he says, 'the more often I come back . . . the more certainly I know I am lost' he captures the predicament of Wittgenstein's private linguist. The private linguist has no way of knowing whether he has correctly identified 'S' as 'S' as opposed to mistaken it for S<sup>2</sup> or S<sup>3</sup>. For that reason, not only can he not verify the sensation on subsequent occasions, but he cannot even be sure that the first experience was 'S'. He lacks an appropriate criterion with which to compare his various sensations, apart from his 'memory' of the first occurrence of 'S' which is itself unreliable. In other words, whatever seemed to be 'S' would be indistinguishable from what was 'actually' S. And all means of deciding appear equally absurd: he can 'attempt to point to it inwardly, cast a sidelong glance at it . . . or try to impress it on [himself] by inwardly staring at it. But none of these "ceremonies" can give us a basis for recognising whether something is or is not the same on some other occasion'.<sup>30</sup> Wittgenstein suggests that I cannot even be certain of the *establishment* of my inner (grammatical) rule, much less hope to *follow it* on successive occasions,<sup>31</sup> and if there is no way to establish correct usage from incorrect usage, then we cannot speak of certainty but only meaninglessness and incoherence.<sup>32</sup>

Another, more Lacanian objection is that I cannot establish an Archimedean point within myself that 'holds still' in order to make my sensations, or ultimately my-self, into objects for scrutiny.<sup>33</sup> Ultimately my 'self' is, so to speak, *in the way*. Lacan traces and problematises the ubiquity of the representative paradigm which he designates as *I see myself seeing myself*.<sup>34</sup> And Foe's lost self does not find his way back, because the 'signs and markers' keep imperceptibly shifting. Or as Wittgenstein states, 'Always get rid of the idea of the private object in the way: assume that it constantly changes, but that you do not notice the change because your memory constantly deceives you'.<sup>35</sup>

The most pertinent facet of the private language argument for this dissertation is the idea that identity, which must be determined through language, cannot be maintained in the absence of a speech community. (Rather something else is maintained, an ideological fiction, used to uphold and reproduce certain social conditions.) A sign must have a rudimentary grammar in which it figures as sign in order to be a sign at all. That is to say, 'The presence of a community of people who act in accordance with rules, [is] a necessary condition

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<sup>30</sup> Henry Leroy Finch, *Wittgenstein—the later philosophy: an exposition of the Philosophical Investigations* (New York: Humanities Press, 1977), 131.

<sup>31</sup> Finch writes, 'What tells us that this is a bona fide instance of what we are supposed to be taking note of and not an occurrence of something different? There is no way of telling, for whatever we imagined to be the same, or whatever seemed to be the same, would do as well as anything. It would be like a game in which every move was at the same time the rule which was supposed to justify the move'. Ibid., p. 132.

<sup>32</sup> All symbolic systems, in other words, must be comprised of criteria of correctness which are not strictly self-generated. In order to demonstrate the inescapably sociality of language, Wittgenstein gives another famous example in which he describes a person who chronically misunderstands the meaning of the word 'pain.' And yet this person uses the word 'pain' at all the same points and on all the same occasions as we do. Could he still be said not to 'understand' the word? What change would occur if he did? Because meaning can only be established through external corroboration if it is to retain 'sense' in the way we normally use the word, then Wittgenstein has demonstrated that 'meaning' must be a function of *use*, i.e., it cannot be thought to be 'essential' or 'fixed' or 'graspable' in an interior space alone.

<sup>33</sup> Hence Kenny's statement: 'The objectification of ourselves to ourselves, which the name-object picture, applied to sensations, suggests, is a fiction'. 'Cartesian Privacy', 130.

<sup>34</sup> See Lacan, 'Anamorphosis', *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, 80-81.

<sup>35</sup> Wittgenstein quoted in Kenny, 126.

for there being any rule-following at all', i.e., speaking of language.<sup>36</sup> Friday uses signs which are unintelligible to Susan Barton. She regards him more sympathetically the moment she understands him as a sign-using creature, but Wittgenstein's paradigm suggests that in the absence of a sign-using community—that is, some semblance of an external set of corroborative 'institutions'—these signs would eventually be meaningless even to Friday himself. Finch elaborates the argument thus:

We begin by imagining a language that only I can understand because its meanings come only from my imagined references to my own private sensations, and then we see that *even I* could not understand such a language, and *even I* would only *appear* to understand it. In other words, what Wittgenstein shows is that the supposed private language (which is totally private by definition) *would not even be a language for the person who had it*, but only empty sounds or meaningless marks. The point is not that no one else could understand it (for this is assumed from the start), but that *even I* myself could not "understand" it.<sup>37</sup>

If I do not recognise a sign on a subsequent occasion, then I cannot be said to 'understand' it. Furthermore, Wittgenstein provides an example of someone who may utter words that could conceivably be recognised as German, but if he uses them in the wrong contexts and without 'rhyme or reason' then this person as good as has no language.<sup>38</sup> (Daniel O'Hara will exploit this reality to great satirical effect in his short films, analysed in Chapter One.) But the question arises, how can the dispersed and dispossessed survivors of the upheavals of 'primitive accumulation', maintain anything in the absence of a community of rule-followers? The solitary speaker—which roughly corresponds to the appropriately named philosophical problem of the 'life-long Crusoe'—is anomalous and incapable of 'rule-following' without the company of other rule-followers. Wittgenstein's remarks on a 'life-long Crusoe' are cursory and inconclusive. But it stands to reason that since any speech act already presumes a structure of address, and any sign is only a sign within a customary, i.e., social, convention of usage, then there is no such thing as a solitary speaker, just as there is no such thing as a private language. Could we not say then that Friday would ultimately 'lose track' of what it was he knew (of Friday)? How can Friday produce an identity, a unified narrative self, and translate it into terms that Susan Barton can recognise in order for her to *know* that which he himself cannot even know?

In the late colonial context, the fiction of the 'true self' persists in the discourse of identity, with identity being coded as that which (naturally) resists efforts to colonise it. Spivak poetically characterises her sense of the enclave of non-mechanism as a 'space which may or may not be a secret but cannot be unlocked'.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Norman Malcolm, 'Wittgenstein on Language and Rules' in *The Later Wittgenstein: from Philosophical Investigations to On Certainty*, eds. Stuart Shanker and David Kilfoyle (London: Routledge, 2002), 135.

<sup>37</sup> Finch, *Wittgenstein—the later philosophy*, 129.

<sup>38</sup> Malcolm discusses Wittgenstein's understanding of the failure of language to exist as such when it has no external means of corroboration, that is, when it is not spoken: 'Wittgenstein always puts emphasis on the fact that the words of language have meaning only because they are enmeshed in common patterns of human life. Even familiar words, when separated from these patterns, cease to be language: "If we conceive of a being who, as we would say, performed actions totally without rhyme or reason, and accompanied these actions with sounds, perhaps with sentences of the German language, still this being would have no language".' Wittgenstein quoted in Malcolm, 'Wittgenstein on Language and Rules', 152.

<sup>39</sup> The full quote reads, 'For every territorial space that is value coded by colonialism *and* every command of metropolitan anticolonialism for the native to yield his "voice", there is a space of withholding, marked by a secret that may not be a secret but cannot be unlocked'. Gayatri Spivak, 'Theory in the Margin: Coetzee's *Foe* reading Crusoe/Roxana' in *Consequences of Theory*, eds. Jonathan Arac and Barbara Johnson (Baltimore: MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), 172; original emphasis.

Ashcroft likewise connects the psychic interior to a spatial metaphor—calling to mind the famous Cartesian theatre—when he writes of Caliban, ‘But there is a place where the power of [Prospero’s] language cannot reach’.<sup>40</sup> Several critics have attributed Friday’s uncanny power to warp and unsettle the broader narrative of *Foe*, as well as the internal castaway narrative Susan Barton hopes to shape into a saleable whole, to an operation of ‘withholding’. Spivak calls Friday the ‘unemphatic agent of withholding in the text’. The space of secrets which cannot be unlocked operates on a principle of withholding. But in order to withhold, Friday must have some thing, an inner possession which he would be inclined to reveal, if not for his desire to punish, avoid detection, or rebel against Susan Barton’s obvious wish to ‘construct him as subject so that he can be her informant’. Indeed, ‘withholding’ suggests the (self-) presence of a thing that demands to be communicated and which requires an act of will to hold back. Yet by so inscribing a pre-discursive subjectivity and hence a motivational structure that we can read, Spivak effaces the *un-decidability* that makes the silence of Friday so disconcerting. Coetzee presents Friday as having no discernable desire to learn English or not to learn it, no discernable desire to return to Africa or not to return, and so on. In other words, it is the *vertiginous vacancy where a subject should be* that makes Friday dreadful to Susan Barton, not his ability to withhold (his truth, the “truth of Friday”<sup>41</sup>) indefinitely. For the latter amounts to a stubbornness that will eventually yield to its obverse: the ‘native’ cannot hold out forever. This withholding is as laudable as it is temporary.

It is a small step from mutilation to the acquisition of English, in order that Friday may be given a voice with which to proclaim his identity.<sup>42</sup> Yet Coetzee, further troubling the presuppositions of metaphysical realism, intimates that if Friday were able to report upon what he saw when he looked deep inside, ‘There [would be] nothing to be found save traces of accidental encounters’.<sup>43</sup> Quine argues something similar when he says not that the mind of the ‘heathen’ is inscrutable, but famously that rather, ‘There is nothing to scrute.’<sup>44</sup> It would be more accurate to think of ourselves ‘as random assemblages of contingent and idiosyncratic needs rather than as more or less adequate exemplifications of a common human essence’.<sup>45</sup> The repeated conjuration of an identarian core against the more apparent ‘radical heterogeneity . . . gaping within man’<sup>46</sup> is of deep political and ideological concern (a fact that Althusser intuited and to which we will return). Lacan argued that Freud’s discovery of the ‘self’s radical ex-centricity to itself’—that is, ‘the non-coincidence of the subject to itself’—could not be glossed over without the reasons for this concealment being ‘profoundly dishonest’.<sup>47</sup> If I am interpellated constantly, to use Althusser’s idiom, or if my ‘true self’ is referred to often enough—if it becomes a certain ubiquitous signified, then this ‘self’ will take on a certain ‘natural’ entrenchment. The use of repetition to establish an illusory consistency is related to what Lacan calls the Cartesian ‘sleight of hand’.

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<sup>40</sup> Ashcroft, *Caliban’s Voice*, 29.

<sup>41</sup> Susan Barton often intones such phrases in *Foe*, such as ‘I would give much to hear the truth of how he was captured by the slave-traders and lost his tongue’. Coetzee, 57.

<sup>42</sup> Coetzee manages to impart the idea that the coaxing of the “true story” out of Friday is not unrelated to a certain prurience on the part of the middle class (reading) public which masquerades as liberal altruism.

<sup>43</sup> Rorty, ‘Freud and Moral Reflection’, 158.

<sup>44</sup> Willard Van Orman Quine, *Ontological Relativity and other essays* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), 5.

<sup>45</sup> Rorty, ‘Freud and Moral Reflection’, 155.

<sup>46</sup> Lacan quoted in Francois Raffoul, ‘Lacan and the Event of the Subject’ in *Cultural Semiosis: tracing the signifier*, ed. Hugh J. Silverman (New York ; London: Routledge, 1998), 66.

<sup>47</sup> Lacan quoted in Raffoul, 79: ‘The radical heteronomy that Freud’s discovery shows gaping within man can never again be covered over without whatever is used to hide it being profoundly dishonest’.



Upon glimpsing the lack at the heart of the *cogito*—refracted as it is through the lens of Friday’s multiplicitous lack—Susan Barton dissolves into panic. She says: ‘I thought I was myself . . . But now I am full of doubt. Nothing is left to me but doubt. I am doubt itself. Who is speaking me? Am I a phantom too? To what order do I belong? And you: who are you?’<sup>48</sup> Mere proximity to Friday it would seem—who in existing at a remove from the Symbolic order rather than within it—cause Susan’s own subject position to become increasingly destabilised and thrown into crisis. The repetition of the word ‘doubt’, here and elsewhere, reaffirms that the crisis is Cartesian in nature and thus linguistic as well.

Linguistic (and Cartesian) privacy form the background to the analyses in Chapter One of Daniel O’Hara’s short films, ‘Yu Ming is Ainm Dom/ My Name is Yu Ming’ and ‘Fluent Dysphasia’. O’Hara underscores the absurdities inherent in the state’s official promotion of Irish alongside the language’s increasing confinement to the status of a kind of non-language. The paradoxically public markers of Irish (on road-signs, in schools) become ‘empty sounds and meaningless marks’ in the absence of a community of ‘rule-followers’ who actually speak it. The comic playfulness of the two films is in tension with the obsolescent speech community whose disappearance it outlines.

### iii.

Jacques Lacan likens the process of subjectivation to a *stick-up*. He belies the notion of ‘choice’ elaborated above, since subject formation, i.e., the call to the Other, is always rendered under conditions of duress, so to speak. One is ‘forced’ to make the ‘choice’ which always unfolds in a violent situation. Hence when Althusser develops his own version of the call to the Other, the scene of interpellation, the hail will be initiated by a representative of the monopolists of violence, i.e., an officer of the law. This violence takes place in a double register. Firstly, since Lacan’s ‘scene’ unfolds after a certain amount of structural violence has already transpired. The only way to be confronted with the ‘choice,’ of so-called ‘being born’, of entering the Symbolic order as subject, is for a series of violent dislocations to first have taken place. In Friday’s case, this violence and dislocation is quite literal—enslavement, mutilation, forced migration—and had it not already occurred, the occasion for him to be ‘born’, to be presented with the choice at all, would never have arisen. Thus Žižek writes, ‘What this means is that the “subject of free choice” in the Western “tolerant” multicultural sense can emerge only as the result of an extremely *violent* process of being torn out of a particular lifeworld, of being cut off from one’s roots’.<sup>49</sup> The conditions of the possibility of subject formation are already imbued with violence from the outset.

Secondly, Lacan allegorises the coercive interchange with the phrase, ‘*your money or your life!*’<sup>50</sup> He explains, ‘If I choose the money, I lose both. If I choose life, I have life without the money, namely, a life deprived of something’. The very fact of being presented with the choice—*mugged*, if you will—is what is at issue, because *both* responses entail a diminution of life, a diminution separated only by degrees. Neither response can be advantageous to the interpellated, who by the very act of being given a choice has lost. Furthermore, Althusser remarks on the suppressed violence of the hail itself. Though it proceeds in language and thus ostensibly outside the remit of force, this is only the case because the agent of the law is galvanised by

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<sup>48</sup> Coetzee, *Foe*, 133.

<sup>49</sup> Žižek, *Violence: six sideways reflections* (New York: Picador, 2008), 124; original emphasis.

<sup>50</sup> Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, 212; original emphasis.

the entire repressive state apparatus. The officer of the law is synecdochal of this apparatus, to which he has ready recourse, any time that language stops working ‘all by itself’. In Chapter Two, I draw out the aspects of what might well be called the disavowed thuggery involved in the scene of interpellation, especially as it is enacted in the Irish post/colony, both north and south. I look at strategies in which the interpellated seek to derail the process of interpellation, considering that the choices (your money or life, which Lacan extends to the more pertinent, your freedom or your life) are unendurable. The targets of the hail in these scenarios deploy indigenous language to counter-interpellative effect.

Lacan’s second formulation of the stick-up proceeds as such: ‘If he chooses freedom, he loses both immediately—if he chooses life, he has life deprived of freedom’. He argues that there is something ‘special’ about this, and that we shall call it the ‘*lethal factor*’.<sup>51</sup> Lethal, because as soon as the subject appears in the discourse of the Other, she disappears elsewhere, which Lacan calls aphanisis. The entry of the subject into the chain of signifiers produces aphanisis, that is, a kind of simultaneous appearance and fading, it entails diminishment or even a kind of death at one site (*being*) inasmuch as it registers at the [O]ther site as *meaning*.<sup>52</sup> This structure of metaphor is crucial, as its ‘constitutive metaphoricity’ is duplicated in the structure of the politics of identity so familiar to post/colonial studies. Lacan writes, ‘The signifier, producing itself in the field of the Other, makes manifest the subject of its signification. But it functions as a signifier only to reduce the subject in question to being no more than a signifier, to petrify the subject in the same movement in which it calls the subject to function, to speak, as subject’.<sup>53</sup> The hardening, or petrification of the subject qua signifier is at once the movement of emergence and renunciation, emergence in the Other and renunciation of the ‘primitive’ logics anathema to it.<sup>54</sup> The individual’s undecidability is ‘traded’, in other words, for an inscription in the Other, and it is in this process of substitution that Lacan locates a certain inescapable violence, even annihilation. In order to become an ‘identity’ in the Other, I must renounce the undecidability that self will replace, but so does this renunciation entail ‘the abandonment or supercession of other potential social forms’.<sup>55</sup> David Lloyd has intimated that a state of ‘sheer potentiality’ must be ‘surrendered and disciplined’ in order to assume the form of the (modern) subject, so that ‘identity’ literally replaces, *displaces*, alternative ‘modes of sociality’.<sup>56</sup> As Francois Raffoul explains, ‘Lacan conceives of representation in a quite classical way, as a *holding-place of a reality in its absence*, or as the murderous substitution of a thing’.<sup>57</sup> Identity serves as the holding place of a reality in its absence, because absent is that which would make identity a redundant discourse. There was no need, for example, under older forms of Gaelic communalism (such as the formations

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 212-3; original emphasis.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 211.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 207.

<sup>54</sup> As David Lloyd elaborates, ‘Every element of the colonized culture that cannot be translated and assimilated to the development of colonial capitalist modernity must either be erased or encoded as a symptom of underdevelopment. The options of the colonized appear to be reduced to the choice of accepting actual or virtual enslavement on the grounds that they have yet to be prepared for civilization or, where possible, of assimilating to the colonial culture. . . . No space remains for the unfolding of the capacities of the colonized that are out of kilter with modernity; indeed, they are no longer regarded as potentialities at all, but as obstacles to be overcome’. *Irish Times*, 29.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> emphasis mine. He quotes Lacan as saying, ‘. . . the symbol manifests itself first of all as the murder of the thing’. Raffoul, ‘Lacan and the Event of the Subject’, 71.

up to and including rundale) to assert oneself as ‘Irish’—this kind of designation only arises, as I explain more fully in Chapter 6, when what it is meant to evoke is already gone.<sup>58</sup>

The fact of having been given a choice (identity or annihilation) that one cannot escape making—this would appear to be the repeated trauma that constitutes the rhythm of colonial modernity. When Spivak argues that the original Friday from Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* ‘kills his other self’ in order that he might become a good colonial servant, she does not exaggerate. Perhaps she might have said ‘killed’ every other possibility. He cuts off, or kills, that which interferes with his steady inscription in the Other. She calls him ‘the prototype of a successful colonial subject’ in that: ‘He learns his master’s speech, does his master’s work, happily swears loyalty, believes the culture of the master is better, and kills his other self to enter the shady plains of northwestern Europe’.<sup>59</sup> Defoe’s Friday speaks to the bear he later savages in *English*, words that Spivak emphasises, before remarking, ‘He is on his way out of the margin’.<sup>60</sup> In order to become a self at all, a self upon the ‘shady plains of northwestern Europe’, Friday has to ‘cut off’ the radical undecidability that ‘self’ supplants. We can surmise perhaps why an idiom of *castration* is so often invoked in this capacity.

Defoe’s Friday is a eunuch, ‘the prototype of a successful colonial subject’, yet Coetzee’s Friday defies such categorisation. Susan Barton intuits, however, that the proof of one will be the index of the other. She thinks of his amputated tongue and wonders ‘if a yet more hideous mutilation might be thrust upon my sight’. She writes

Now when Cruso told me that the slavers were in the habit of cutting out the tongues of their prisoners to make them more tractable, I confess I wondered whether or not he might be employing a figure, for the sake of delicacy: whether the lost tongue might stand not only for itself but for a more atrocious mutilation; whether by a dumb slave I was to understand a slave unmanned.<sup>61</sup>

Castration does not merely signify what Barton refers to as ‘eternal obedience, as gelding takes the fire out of a stallion’.<sup>62</sup> Lacanian psychoanalysis provides a striking description. Castration is ‘not the negative operation of the removal of an organ; on the contrary, it is a labour of unceasing proliferation of successive signifiers. And if anything suffers privation, it is not the penis, but the subject itself. To castrate is to decapitate, for the more the signifiers insist and reappear, the more the subject is less’.<sup>63</sup> Another way to conceptualise castration within the context of this dissertation is in relation to a linguistic identity politics. Once the subject accedes to an inscription in the Other, whatever she might strategise in terms of linguistic resistance has already been anticipated there. The very idea, so central to nationalist politics, that I could achieve a ‘restored wholeness’ in the Other by way of identity is not subversive but preordained. In other words, as Manfred Frank

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<sup>58</sup> This loss of potential, Lloyd argues, is accompanied by the chronic insistence by the state that what the subject has lost can be ‘mourned’ and ameliorated by way of an aesthetic identification with the state, (i.e., a nationalist identity), in which lies ‘the representation of a restored wholeness and harmony. Individual partiality is cured by a subjection that seems to offer the reward of a no less partial autonomy’. *Irish Times*, 27.

<sup>59</sup> Spivak, ‘Theory in the Margin’, 169.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 169–70.

<sup>61</sup> Coetzee, *Foe*, 118–9.

<sup>62</sup> Coetzee, *Foe*, 98.

<sup>63</sup> He goes on to say, ‘If, in summary, we change our vocabulary to ask anew what castration is, we can say that it is an initiation, an entry of the child into the world of limits in order to encounter *jouissance*, not to know it but to signify it, at the cost of disappearing. Once more we reach the same conclusion: the child enters the world and vanishes’. Juan-David Nasio, ‘The Concept of the Subject of the Unconscious’, *Disseminating Lacan*, eds. David Pettigrew and Francois Raffoul (Albany: State University of NY Press, 1996), 32–3.

writes, 'This means that the attempt at a phantasmatic self-grounding of the 'I' (*ich*) which evades the incisions and articulations of the symbolic order fails precisely because *the wish to preserve itself from the Other's intervention . . . has itself already been produced by the Other*'.<sup>64</sup> Identity politics has as its goal a more prominent inscription in the Other. Whatever identarian move I could make is already domesticated because it is always already *awaited*. That all eventualities can be determined in advance is due to the fact that whatever is outside the parameters of its logic could never have appeared *at all*, hence Lacan writes, 'The Other is the locus in which is situated the chain of the signifiers that governs *whatever may be made present of the subject*—it is the field of that living being in which the subject has to appear'.<sup>65</sup> In the context of our discussion, *this* is the meaning of castration.

Friday, it would seem, keeps avoiding this trap, to the agitation and discomfort of Susan Barton. She steals looks, scours his body with her gaze, and thinks she has 'seen' the voided appendage, proof of his (further) lack. But she cannot be certain: 'What had been hidden from me was revealed. I saw; or, I should say, my eyes were open to what was present to them. I saw and I believed I had seen, though afterwards I remembered Thomas, who also saw, but could not be brought to believe till he had put his hand in the wound'.<sup>66</sup> That the phallus resembles the tongue and that the tongue resembles a worm make for intertextual echoes in Coetzee and Lacan, since in the Lacanian lexicon, the phallus-tongue-worm invoke the cleavages of language. Lacan speaks of the worm which 'worms' its way into the subject as the effect of language and splits it. Susan Barton thinks of the worm of Friday's stump, 'the thick stub at the back of the mouth . . . wagging and straining under the sway of emotion as Friday tried to utter himself, like a worm cut in half contorting itself in death-throes'.<sup>67</sup> Both Coetzee and Lacan, moreover, interrupt and undermine the notion of the pre-discursive unity of the subject.

In the vein of Spivak's 'withholding,' Lewis MacLeod argues that Friday does in fact have a tongue but decides not to use it. He proposes 'to read Friday's silence as a voluntary act, to think Friday has the capacity, just not the inclination for speech'.<sup>68</sup> Friday, according to this paradigm, refuses to offer himself up as raw material to the discursive machine in which Susan Barton and Foe hope to entangle him. Yet is it not the case that he will be 'cognised' and ensnared in imperial discourse with or without his permission and with or without his participation? To put it another way, MacLeod configures Friday as one who 'messages' in a particular way. For example, he communicates 'refusal' or 'contempt' for hegemonic discourse, but within this construction, so are his actions confined to what Freud would call 'acting out'. 'Acting out'—no matter how aggressive or disruptive—is still sending a message to the Other, it is a way of seeking a more appropriate or a bolder inscription. Meanwhile, Lacan contrasts 'acting out' with the rarer and more radical 'passage to the act' (*passage à l'acte*). The passage to the act is unique in that it seeks not to implore the Other for one or another end but rather to *exit* the Symbolic order altogether. The *passage à l'acte*, in effecting an extrication from the Other, is successful precisely because it is not 'understood' and thus could not have been foreseen. This is very

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<sup>64</sup> Manfred Frank, 'The "true subject" and its double: Jacques Lacan's hermeneutics' in *The Subject and the Text: essays on literary theory and philosophy*, ed. Andrew Bowie, trans. Helen Atkins (Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1997), 109; original emphasis.

<sup>65</sup> Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, 203.

<sup>66</sup> Coetzee, *Foe*, 120.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>68</sup> Lewis MacLeod, "'Do We of Necessity Become Puppets in a Story?' or Narrating the World: On Speech, Silence, and Discourse in J. M. Coetzee's *Foe*", *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, Volume 52, No 1 (Spring 2006), 7.

similar to Badiou's notion of event as rupture or radical break, since it cannot be explained in the language of the *doxa*. In Chapter 4, I argue that the excremental semiotics of the 'Dirty Protest' should be read not as a belligerent message to the Other, nor as a means to beseech the Other for 'political status', but rather as a means to effectuate a 'passage to the act,' that is, a complex performance of collectivity that both exposes the Other as non-existent and escapes, however fleetingly, from the awful remit of its 'forced choice'. MacLeod's assertion that 'no one can locate Friday well enough to manipulate him'<sup>69</sup> is a simplification of Coetzee's project. That he has a tongue, but decides not to use it, also partakes in the logic of the 'withheld secrets' of the Cartesian enclave. In MacLeod's version of events, Friday becomes legible, and we can *identify* with him and his 'choices'. Yet to impose a transparency that Friday lacked—to ascribe motivation, intention, and 'agency' to his unexplainable behaviour—is to leech the strange power he holds out of the narrative entirely. Much more interesting, I would argue, is the warping effect on events and their narration that the tongueless slave, in his unknowability, produces. For if it is the case that "the 'I' of self-consciousness exists essentially as that which the Other addresses and makes demands upon"<sup>70</sup>—if the I is nothing more than an appeal to the Other—then Friday neither makes demands nor receives them. He is, and remains, foundationally undecidable.

Confronted by the ubiquitous hail, *your freedom or your life*, Friday hesitates, and thus exists in a kind of ontological suspension. By default of not-choosing, it could be said that he consequently 'chooses' to give up his freedom and preserve his life. Except that he does not go on to behave in any of the ways we might normally ascribe to a free person, or an enslaved person for that matter, or any recognisable person at all. (Likewise, in Chapter 2, it is dangerously unclear which Mícheál has chosen, but because it appears to be freedom, he loses both.)

The final section of this introduction will examine the possibilities for a subjunctive politics in which the goal is not to produce a more robust identity, but to produce the conditions in which identity becomes superfluous. Or as Edouard Glissant has written of the (French Caribbean) colonial experience: 'To the extent that French linguistic hegemony is exercised through a mechanism of "humanism", this revision could partake in what might be called an 'anti-humanism'.'<sup>71</sup> Firstly, it will be necessary to make a brief detour through the nature of colonial-capitalist reproduction before exploring how the figures in this dissertation have sought to disrupt it.

#### iv.

Susan Barton is appalled that apart from a few monosyllabic order-words, Cruso never imparted to Friday any English.<sup>72</sup> She is as nonplussed by the absence of language as she is by Cruso's disinterest in recording events or keeping track of time. She can find no makeshift journal, no carvings, no notches indicating

<sup>69</sup> MacLeod, 'Do We of Necessity', 6.

<sup>70</sup> Frank, 'The "true subject" and its double', 109.

<sup>71</sup> Edouard Glissant, quoted in Jacques Derrida, *The Monolingualism of the Other; or, The Prosthesis of Origin*, trans. Patrick Mensah (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1998), epigraph.

<sup>72</sup> To Susan Barton's distress, Cruso had made no effort to teach Friday the rudiments of language and apart from occasional monosyllabic orders, spoke little more than he did. 'I said, "How many words of English does Friday know?"' "As many as he needs," replied Cruso. "This is not England, we have no need of a great stock of words" [. . .]. "Yet would it not have lightened your solitude had Friday been master of English? You and he could have experienced, all these years, the pleasures of conversation; you might have brought home to him some of the blessings of civilization and made him a better man". Coetzee, *Foe*, 22.

that 'he counted the years of his banishment or the cycles of the moon'.<sup>73</sup> Indeed Spivak argues that because there is little attention to 'the timing of labour and history' in *Foe*, we can safely assume that Coetzee is intent on narrating the story of 'empire and gender, rather than the story of capital'.<sup>74</sup> Unlike the industrious hero of Defoe's work—who James Joyce called the true prototype of the British colonist<sup>75</sup>—Coetzee's Cruso may have been produced by merchant capitalism, but he has no further interest in 'being its agent'. Satisfying him-self with the simplest of tools, content for time to pass unmeasured,<sup>76</sup> he positions himself and his activities, according to Spivak, well beyond the relations of capital. Yet this assessment amounts to an oddly selective understanding on Spivak's part of capital as synonymous with metropolitan *production*. By opposing late 'empire' to capital as parallel but autonomous enterprises, she misinterprets the antecedent conditions for the consolidation and emergence of capitalism as well as the inherent logic of its own self-renewal. Yet notions of capital as relatively confined to the mechanisms of 'the factory' are not unusual. As Althusser notes, 'The tenacious obviousnesses of the point of view of production alone . . . are so integrated into our everyday 'consciousness', that it is extremely hard, not to say almost impossible, to raise oneself to the point of view of reproduction'.<sup>77</sup> From its inception capital has been both a multi-vectored and transnational phenomenon, and colonialism is both its precondition as well as a primary means to its self-perpetuation.

The 'labour', therefore, of settler colonialism is not *unproductive* so much as it is appropriative and reproductive. Still Spivak reads the relentless terracing of the island as inconsequential, a measure of Cruso's gentle bequeathing of what she calls a 'lightly inscribed space to an indefinite future'. She derives this notion from his response to Susan when she asks what he intends to plant. He says, 'This planting is not for us . . . .We have nothing to plant—that is our misfortune . . . .The planting is reserved for those who come after us and have the foresight to bring seed. I only clear the ground for them'.<sup>78</sup> Spivak is of the opinion, alongside Barton, that terracing without seeds makes for 'a stupid labour'<sup>79</sup> and a 'foolish kind of agriculture'. Yet these are anything but 'light inscriptions' or evidence of frivolity or indifference. Cruso is as fixated on remaking the wild landscape into a picture of rationalised agriculture as Susan Barton will be with getting Friday to 'speak'. The terraces are not light but *extensive*, so much so that Susan Barton asks, 'Is it your plan to clear the whole island of growth, and turn it into terraces?'<sup>80</sup> The labour of the settler colonist may appear unproductive but that is because it is a labour of transition, of deferral, one which does not so much reap a harvest as enable its reaping in future. On the vastness of the endeavour Susan Barton remarks throughout the novel, though she likens it to the behaviour of ants that 'carry grains of sand to and fro, for want of better occupation'.<sup>81</sup> She notes

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>74</sup> Spivak, 'Theory in the Margin', 161.

<sup>75</sup> James Joyce, pamphlet entitled, "Daniel Defoe", ed. and trans. from the Italian by Joseph Prescott, (Buffalo, NY: State University of New York at Buffalo, December 1964), 24.

<sup>76</sup> This, in contrast to the original protagonist, who James Joyce described as industry personified, a figure who, 'cast away on a desert island, in his pocket a knife and a pipe, becomes an architect, a carpenter, a knife-grinder, an astronomer, a baker, a shipwright, a potter, a saddler, a farmer, a tailor, an umbrella-maker and a clergyman'. Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Louis Althusser, 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes towards an Investigation' in *Lenin and Philosophy and other essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001), 124.

<sup>78</sup> Coetzee quoted in Spivak, 'Theory in the Margin', 161.

<sup>79</sup> Coetzee, *Foe*, 35.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 86.

There were twelve levels of terracing at the time I arrived, each some twenty paces deep and banked with stone walls a yard thick and at their highest as high as a man's head. Within each terrace the ground was levelled and cleared; the stones that made up the walls had been dug out of the earth or borne from elsewhere one by one. I asked Cruso how many stones had gone into the walls. A hundred thousand or more, he replied. A mighty labour, I remarked.<sup>82</sup>

After he is dead, Susan accuses Cruso of nurturing idle fantasies about the coming of Aryans ('golden-haired strangers'<sup>83</sup>) bearing sacks of corn, yet they are precisely to whom such labour is directed—if not immediate descendants then white waves of the settlement to come. It is both a Weberian and a Lockean labour; Weberian because it is unceasing and unrewarded, for its own sake, purifying in its pointlessness, a personal sacrifice for the future, and Lockean, because the very act of 'mixing' labour with the land confers upon it *ownership*. Labour itself changes the relationship between labourer and land through a process of 'annexation'. Locke states with almost Biblical gravitas, 'And hence subduing or cultivating the earth and having dominion, we see, are joined together. The one gave title to the other. . . . And the condition of human life, which requires labour and materials to work on, necessarily introduce private possessions'.<sup>84</sup> This Lockean trajectory of private ownership, once put into effect, will be difficult to reverse. The sense of futurity involved (of activating what is dormant into terms of the 'henceforth') may provide the distinction between Spivak's productive time and Coetzee's reproductive time<sup>85</sup>: the latter entails both present activity and the colonisation of the future. Reproduction entrenches and sets in motion the social relations that impel their own renewal. Reproduction accomplishes something in the present at the same time as it projects that same thing into the future; it simultaneously works upon current relations and *prolongs* them, encouraging where possible a certain self-generating momentum.

If Cruso does not measure productive time—is not 'the normative man in nature, already committed to a constitutive chronometry'—it is because his manservant *is a slave*. There is no need to calculate Friday's labour power in wage-units, as there is no surplus value to be extracted, and thus no cause to keep track of time at all. Furthermore, despite Susan's objections, Cruso's relationship to Friday does not require language, because it is strictly coercive. All that Cruso requires, in other words, is Friday's labouring body; he does not require his assent. At the same time, the arrival of Susan Barton on the island, and the subsequent emergence of Friday's speechlessness *as a conundrum*, signifies the difficulties of reconciling the modus operandi of mercantile capital (plunder, territorialisation and enslavement) with the imperatives of a consolidating commercial capital, with its need for a private subject, who, amongst other things owns her person and thus her labour power, which she can exchange for additional property. Friday marks an aporia because the mixing of his labour with land cannot confer entitlement upon his person since he neither owns the person nor the labour power. Cruso's labour confers ownership; Friday's does not. Yet the labouring body of the slave (or the destitute

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>84</sup> In *Of Property*, Locke writes, 'Whatsoever, then, he removes out of the state that Nature hath provided and left it in, he hath mixed his labour with it, and joined it to something that is his own, and thereby makes it his property. It being by him removed from the common state Nature placed it in, it hath by this labour something annexed to it that excludes the common right of other men.' John Locke, *Two Treatises on Government*. Ch 5. On Property, no. 26. <http://www.lonang.com/exlibris/locke/loc-205.htm>, accessed 15/11/11.

<sup>85</sup> All production under capital would also be technically reproductive, even in the comparatively straightforward arena of the metropolitan factory. Althusser speaks of "'simple" reproduction (reproducing exactly the previous conditions of production) or "on an extended scale" (expanding them)', 124.

rack-rented peasant) is no longer sufficient to satisfy the reconfigured exigencies of global capital. What must be activated in its stead is the subject who speaks and desires. Social relations will no longer operate primarily by force, in other words, *because they operate by language*.<sup>86</sup> Language overcomes coercion in the new dispensation, where the subject succeeds the slave.

In other words, Cruso's era of slavery and territorial conquest is at an end, hence his death aboard the rescue ship en route to England. This oceanic crossing, this geographical shift midway through the book from the desert island to the heart of empire, effectuates a socio-historical transition, inaugurating what Spivak calls 'the trauma of the transition from mercantile to commercial capitalism'.<sup>87</sup> If Cruso is associated with slavery and conquest, of what can Susan Barton's anxious anti-slavery stance consist, if not the embodiment of the transition to a linguistic (ideological) rather than an overtly coercive capital? No longer in bondage, then, Friday rather falls under her 'care'.<sup>88</sup> The corollary to Cruso's settler colonial 'ground-clearing' ('I only clear the ground for them') would be what Spivak terms, in regard to the Christian colonial mission, 'soul-making'. Susan Barton stands in for the liberal-secular soul-maker—the 'subject-maker' perhaps—who takes Friday on as her burden. She regards it as her mission to hasten his entry into the Symbolic order, and likewise, Foe states, 'We must make Friday's silence speak, as well as the silence surrounding Friday'.<sup>89</sup>

And he is already halfway there: expected by the fact of a name, 'Friday'; deposited on the grimy streets of Victorian London; and manumitted upon the death of Cruso, he makes land as a free person. This nominal ascription, this spatial determination and this newfound ownership of self—a residence, a proper name, and a status before the Law—already presuppose him as *subject* in a way he needs only to affirm in order to actualise. In other words, because he is no longer a slave, Susan Barton does not force him to do anything. Instead, she offers him a multitude of opportunities. She tries communicating with him non-verbally, she tries teaching him to shape English letters, she tries engaging him in pictorial referent-to-word exercises with a chalk and slate, and so on. She slips, unintentionally, between developing his general usefulness and training him like a dog: 'Watch and Do: those are my two principal words for Friday, and with them I accomplish much'.<sup>90</sup> Because he is not a slave, she presents him with choices, yet she never ceases trying to impose limits on his abyssal presence. She speaks of building a bridge of words to Friday and constantly interpellates him: 'Through all my chatter . . . I make the air around him thick with words'.<sup>91</sup> She saturates the ether with her language.

<sup>86</sup> I derive this notion and phrasing from Jean-Jacques Lecercle, whose thorough and insightful elaborations of such concepts are to be found in *Interpretation as Pragmatics* (Macmillan 1999) and *The Force of Language* (Palgrave Macmillan 2004) in particular.

<sup>87</sup> Spivak, 'Theory in the Margin,' 165.

<sup>88</sup> Similarly, Marx analysed the character of the transition from feudalism to capitalism, in which continuing relations of domination and servitude (Master and slave, lord and serf, etc.) are transformed into the assumption of 'free and equal agents' who meet on the market, one selling his labour power, the other buying it, in a 'transparent' exchange. Relations of coercion are still operative, but they are rewritten into the social-contract narrative of "freedom", "equality" and exchange. Relations of domination and servitude persist, but are simply displaced. Friday, manumitted, but still outside the remit of language is neither properly slave nor subject, and thus provokes something resembling a symptom. As Žižek writes, 'One has to look for the discovery of the symptom in the way Marx conceived the passage from feudalism to capitalism. With the establishment of bourgeois society, the relations of domination and servitude are *repressed*: formally, we are apparently concerned with free subjects whose interpersonal relations are discharged of all fetishism; the repressed truth—that of the persistence of domination and servitude—emerges in a symptom which subverts the ideological appearance of equality, freedom, and so on'. Žižek, *Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 2008), 22.

<sup>89</sup> Coetzee, *Foe*, 142.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>91</sup> Coetzee, *Foe*, 59.



(Althusser makes the play on the word 'subject' in order to describe the paradox of the individual who must 'freely' subject herself in order to become a subject.)

Yet no legible sign and no affirmation are forthcoming. Muteness doubles as opacity, the heart of darkness is reflected back to the metropole as the darkness at its heart, and Susan Barton's anxiety amounts to a fear that 'the inchoate practices and desires of the savage' will fail to be 'disciplined'.<sup>92</sup> Ever the mistress of empire, she both pities and despises her black charge, though her empathy strains against itself and her dread of Friday deepens. In his speechless indeterminacy, he literally cannot be figured. And this strikes her as *monstrous*: 'Did Crusoe truly believe, I wonder, that you were once a cannibal child? Was it his dark fear that the craving for human flesh would come back to you, that you would one night slit his throat and roast his liver and eat it? Was his talk of cannibals rowing from island to island in search of meat a warning, a masked warning, against you and your appetites?'<sup>93</sup> Later she fears he will go back and find the dead baby they discover in the ditch and eat its cold corpse, if not her own warm flesh. Is Friday harmless, like a slow-witted child? Or is he cunning, waiting until we sleep 'slit our throats'?

The problem is having no way to know, no measure by which to read intention. The structure of interpellation is the call to transparency and assent to things as they are, such that the subject verbally acknowledges the 'obvious', 'right', and 'true' nature of the conditions of her existence.<sup>94</sup> This is in accordance with the imperative to speak English and 'cut off' the atavistic features of indigenous ways. (This fear of the judgment of the Other, that one will indeed be monstrous, effectively decommissions vast swathes of indigenous resource. It is not only the Other who believes I am monstrous, but I believe it myself. To relinquish the fear of the Other's judgment—for whom one will *always be*, in Homi Bhabha's phrase, 'not quite/ not white'<sup>95</sup>—would appear to be the first step toward the revolutionary act.) If I speak English, I can never be a complete void, because my coordinates can be situated, so to speak, by virtue of the fact that you speak English, too. Brian Friel's play, *Translations*, analysed in Chapter Three, advances from the notion that the remaking of the world in English is agreeable so long as it is properly and sensitively indigenised. In fact there is something refreshing about the creativity involved in such mutual accommodations. Violence indeed erupts in the play but it is *off stage*, as if to say that violence and politics are separate from more transcendental matters of culture and language. (Hence the ideology of 'The Fifth Province' where Habermasian consensus is the goal as opposed to further antagonism).<sup>96</sup> Friel dismisses the nostalgic pieties that would 'return' the Irish to land and community. Because it dramatises the translation of the Irish life-world into English, metaphoricity is again central. Irish heteronomy is traded for the orderly phonetic signifiers of English. The linguistic parameters around Irish undecidability are enforced by Friel with an instructive and self-conscious lack of sentimentality. English

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<sup>92</sup> Lloyd, *Irish Times*, 27.

<sup>93</sup> Coetzee, *Foe*, 81.

<sup>94</sup> These are Althusser's adjectives for the 'obviousnesses as obviousnesses' that make up ideology. 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses', 161.

<sup>95</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, 'Of Mimicry and Man', *The Location of Culture* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 1994), 131.

<sup>96</sup> A recent article in 'The Irish Times' reflects on the opening of *Translations* in 1980 and the impetus behind its creation: '[Field Day] believed that in the theatre they might find an imaginative space where all cultural traditions on the island of Ireland—Protestant, Catholic, unionist, or nationalist—might be accommodated. This idea called to mind the rhetoric of the Abbey Theatre's original intention to create a theatre that would be "outside the political questions that divide us". Richard Kearney, one of the thinkers associated with the Friel-Rea enterprise, called the imaginative space they were seeking the 'fifth province' of Ireland'. Sara Keating, 'The author of Ireland's fifth province', *The Irish Times*, (Tuesday, June 28, 2011). <http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/features/2011/0628/1224299677626.html> accessed. 06/02/2012.

becomes Hiberno-English, or as with other post/colonial locales, another ‘global english’ with the lower-casing of the name meant to signify dissociation with colonial privilege. As attractive as these scenarios may be, none of them interrupts the reproduction of capitalist social relations so much as they *self-adapt* it. Identity is nothing but an indigenised idiom for the subject, such that the discourse of identity amounts to the spontaneous *auto-translation* of the colonised for the benefit of capital.

Once the initial assent can be secured, all the violence that preceded its solicitation is effectively assuaged, dis-remembered, lost in this process of becoming-subject. One does not seek redress for the violence ensuing upon a state of affairs in which she has a pre-inscribed position<sup>97</sup> and which she has publicly acknowledged as ‘obvious,’ ‘right’ and ‘true’. Isn’t what Susan Barton ultimately seeks from ‘Friday’ the assumption of what Derrida calls ‘the auto-position of the subject saying yes to itself before the possibility of discourse’<sup>98</sup>? Must he not, upon acceding to the position of subject, thereby accept the violations and dislocations of imperialism as more or less *disinterested improvements*? Is it not then an affirmation from the victim of violence himself that such violence was necessary and therefore palatable and even an occasion for gratitude? It is without irony that Susan Barton issues her refrain: ‘He does not understand that I am leading him to freedom. He does not know what freedom is . . . How can he guess . . . that without me he is lost?’<sup>99</sup> The assent, the ‘choice’, of subjectivation is the mechanism by which both prior and continuing violence is made linguistic, ‘mitigated’ and normalised. Hence the subject is the site of all ideological ‘conscription’: ‘That you and I are subjects – and that that does not cause any problems – is an ideological effect, the elementary ideological effect’.<sup>100</sup>

Friday is absorbed in unknowable obliquities (the spinning, the repetitive music, the sullen blankness, and previously on the island, the strewing of flower petals off the shore). Susan broods: ‘I saw pictures in my mind of pincers gripping his tongue and a knife slicing into it, as must have happened, and I shuddered.’<sup>101</sup> Susan’s desire to know is all-consuming. Friday must yield his voice, but what is it he could say, assuming he were capable of speech, that Susan Barton does not already know? That is, with what words should he interpret his abduction and grisly amputation? For what community of listeners and to what end? Were Friday to be schooled in the pursuits of the classes who write, in other words, he would ultimately ‘speak’, but only *to them*. What Coetzee successfully shows is that the obsession with giving Friday ‘voice’ has almost nothing to do with him, and everything to do with Susan Barton.<sup>102</sup> It forms a kind of triangulated appeal to the Other, a desire bordering at times on paranoia and panic, which may be read as a ‘call upon the Other to vouch for the truth in which [*she*] exists.’<sup>103</sup> Because Friday never properly writes and thus never ‘speaks,’ his parturition is stalled.<sup>104</sup>

<sup>97</sup> On the ‘preinscription of the subject in discourse’ see Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe in *The Title of the Letter: A Reading of Lacan*, trans. Francois Raffoul and David Pettigrew (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 1992) where they quote Lacan: ‘Thus the subject too, if it appears the slave of language is all the more so the slave of a discourse in the universal movement in which its place is already inscribed at birth if only by virtue of its proper name’. *Title of the Letter*, 30.

<sup>98</sup> Spivak, ‘The Problem of Cultural Self-Representation’, in *The Post-colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues*, ed. Sarah Harasym (London: Routledge, 1990), 54.

<sup>99</sup> Coetzee, *Foe*, 101.

<sup>100</sup> Althusser, *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, 161.

<sup>101</sup> She goes on to say, ‘I covertly observed him as he ate, and with distaste heard the tiny coughs he gave now and then to clear his throat, saw how he did his chewing between his front teeth, like a fish. I caught myself flinching when he came near, or holding my breath so as not to have to smell him’. Coetzee, *Foe*, 24.

<sup>102</sup> Spivak, ‘Theory in the Margin’, 155.

<sup>103</sup> Frank, ‘The “true subject” and its double’, 110.

Susan Barton says, 'He is the child of his silence, a child unborn, a child waiting to be born that cannot be born'.<sup>105</sup>

Yet if Friday hovers around the void of being no-one, it is because he has not undergone the metaphorisation that would replace an unravaged life-world with a congealed identity in the Other. In regard to Wittgenstein's sociality, Norman Malcolm writes

To speak a language is to participate in a way of living in which many people are engaged. The language I speak gets its meaning from the common ways of acting and responding to people. . . . To follow the rules for the use of an expression is nothing other than to use the expression as it is ordinarily used—which is to say, as it is used by those many people who take part in the activities in which the expression is embedded.<sup>106</sup>

In time, Friday, bereft of a community, will have no language at all, except the one Susan Barton 'gives' him. The 'glossectomy' of dispossessed peoples (who cannot tell, and therefore neither can they continue, indefinitely, to *remember*, the stories of those dispossessions) is not accidental. What if 'the native' exists only at the site of her intersecting social practices, is *nothing but* her relationship to land, language, and community? When one by one she is dispossessed of those things, there is truly nothing left, particularly, if as Gilbert Ryle would put it, 'there is no ghost in the machine'.<sup>107</sup>

In some ways, Coetzee has staged the unthinkable, the nothingness prior to language. He has succeeded in placing Friday in the (impossible) position of the *infans*, the child who does not yet speak. The *infans* cannot 'code' or 'witness' her own accession to the Other, since in the absence of prior language, she is not 'there' for the drama of entry. Any 'thereness' would be a (false and) retroactive ascription. Though shrouded in 'primordial fog', as it were, we all know that we did in fact acquire language, even though we too were absent at the event of its happening. Is Friday attendant at his own lacerating shift from the 'nothing' into language, provided he goes on to speak? It is a most irregular constellation of states that Coetzee dramatises, but the most striking aspect, I would argue, is its disruption of what Althusser named the *toujours déjà*. Coetzee breaks apart the sequence, the presumed *telos*, the inevitable trajectory, the unilinear time of the *infans* hurtling toward the 'I'. Instead he makes thinkable the 'return' to radical undecidability and the unmaking of the 'forced choice' by way of Friday. Walter Benjamin's Marxism, it might be added, relies on this very sense that temporality is not unalterable, that by making the sort of retroactive ascriptions we commonly make anyway, we can still 'change' the truth-conditions of the past, and thereby seize and activate alternative possibilities. The enormous weight of the *toujours-deja*, the unrelenting march of 'empty homogenous time' is scrambled in this way, rewritten, and lived anew. Friday enacts an anti-temporal return to 'sheer potentiality', invoking what could yet be a Benjaminian 'redemption' of the missed opportunity. To a great extent, the chapters on the subjunctive politics

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<sup>104</sup> The process by which the subject emerges in the Other itself contains echoes of its social-reproductive function, which Lacan locates first of all in etymology: 'I will go further still and the Latinists will bear me out, to the *se parere*, the *s'engendrer*, the *to be engendered*, which is involved here. How, at this level, has the subject to procure himself? For that is the origin of the word that designates in Latin *to engender*. It is juridical, as indeed, curiously enough, are all the words in Indo-European that designate *to put into the world*. The word *parturition* itself originates in a word which, in its root, simply means to procure a child from the husband—a juridical, and it should be said, social operation'. Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, 214; original emphasis.

<sup>105</sup> Coetzee, *Foe*, 122.

<sup>106</sup> Malcolm, 'Wittgenstein on Language and Rules', 164.

<sup>107</sup> See *The Concept of Mind* (London: Hutchinson, 1949) for an extensive critique of the *cogito*.

of the H-Block struggles, especially Chapter Five, involve just such a reconstruction of the damaged but recuperable past, which is solidified and enabled through the speaking of the Irish language. To speak indigenous language in these contexts is to ‘resurrect’ the dead as well as the lost context in which they would have thrived.

Because Friday does not assent, neither does he exonerate past violence nor participate in its present and future enactments. Friday deters and frustrates the machinery of social reproduction by virtue of the fact that he does not speak. It literally stops with him. And because subject formation, and hence social reproduction, cannot proceed without language, so does language provide a zone of intense volatility. Suppose interpellation becomes counter-interpellation, language gets returned as a ‘dead letter’, or is replaced by an opaque and ‘primitive’ code such as Irish Gaelic? Then reproduction necessarily falters. For how else do the ‘primitive’ languages appear to the speaker of English, if not as instances of unmanageable difference, as obstacles to social reproduction? Subject formation in the colonies cannot take place without the transparency which is its aim, and language which is its vector. Althusser wrote: ‘As Marx said, every child knows that a social formation which did not reproduce the conditions of production at the same time as it produced would not last a year’.<sup>108</sup> The anti-colonial promise inherent in the words, ‘would not last a year,’ provides the impetus to those instances of linguistic resistance elaborated in the forthcoming chapters.

The Irish language, like Friday’s tongue, vanishes as a result of violence. Irish, like Friday, also behaves like a symptom<sup>109</sup> in the post/colonial republic. That is, the Irish language cannot be ‘corrected’ (i.e., restored) lest the whole structural edifice on which the Anglophone social relations of the post/colonial state are erected begins to crack. Likewise Friday presents a symptom because the only way to ‘resolve’ him would be by reassembling the community and mode of life in which his utterances would have meaning.<sup>110</sup> And Africa, like Friday, has been dismembered, too, it can only exist as nostalgia and damage from within the new power dispensation of global capitalism. Hence Susan Barton’s decision to send Friday back to ‘Africa’ – her attempts to resolve him as symptom—are confused and defeated in advance.<sup>111</sup> Still Friday’s tonguelessness is not accidental. Coetzee constantly reminds us of the grim violence of its occurrence so that we can never suppose Friday simply preferred to speak English.

Friday responds to his interpellations so opaquely as to render them inoperative, confounding his interlocutor into a confused immobility. Susan Barton clearly detects a threat in this response but the nature of the threat is so diffuse as to make it unclear how best to mitigate it. Friday’s puzzling behaviour does not outmanoeuvre or overcome his interlocutor, so much as it suspends her ability to follow through on the scenario

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<sup>108</sup> Althusser, ‘Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses’, 123.

<sup>109</sup> The notion of Friday as symptom is nicely encapsulated by Susan’s words ‘To tell my story and be silent on Friday’s tongue is no better than offering a book for sale with pages in it quietly left empty. Yet the only tongue that can tell Friday’s secret is the tongue he has lost!’, *Foe*, 67.

<sup>110</sup> Yet Cruso, Foe and Susan Barton understand at some level that this ‘resolution’ broadly speaking would *undo them*, supported as they are by the ‘glossectomy’ of the dispossessed in order to emerge as a class who can ‘oppose it’ in the first place. In other words, Susan Barton cannot even *be* Susan Barton—an educated, benevolent anti-imperialist—(and indeed Coetzee cannot be Coetzee, a paradox of which he is well aware) without the prior spoils of imperialism providing the conditions necessary for their emergence. The spoils of imperialism, that is, produce the possibilities of a class which can go on to ‘oppose’ it—or rather in the case of Susan Barton, to oppose its *excesses*, since so must it reinforce the central logic of global capitalism in order to guarantee a continued existence. And it is the excesses, of course, that best signify the logic, they being not aberrations (and therefore not really excesses at all) but structural requirements.

as it had been constructed. It disassembles the terms by which the world proceeds and this is precisely why it is powerful.

Yet indigenous language is even more effective than silence because it contains within it the possibility of recovering a lost speech community, which will disable the reproduction of *this* violent social formation by invigorating and enacting another.

## 1. Irish as Symptom: The Short Films of Daniel O'Hara

In his seminal essay, 'The Language of African Literature,' the Kenyan novelist Ngugi wa Thiong'o underscores the subtle but mortifying effects on decolonisation of continuing to think, write, speak, and otherwise live, in the same language that conceived, justified, and administered your colonisation. This is because English in Ngugi's construct is not a transparent vessel or a medium without content, needing only to be indigenised following independence. Rather a language itself already comprises an episteme.<sup>112</sup> English in Kenya, in other words, constitutes a world-view with an historic inheritance, unforeseeable epiphenomena, and most importantly, lasting material effects.

Ngugi suggests we consider the Swedes. The Swedish can comport themselves in English with agility should the commercial, educational, diplomatic, or creative need arise: '[English] is spoken in Britain and in Sweden and Denmark. But for Swedish and Danish people English is only a means of communication with non-Scandinavians'.<sup>113</sup> There is no imperative, in other words, to abandon or despise Swedish or Danish as a result. The fluent and occasional use of English need not be predicated on the burial of Swedish. What distinguishes Sweden from Kenya (and for my purposes, Ireland) is a heritage of colonial damage. Irish in Ireland could be said to have been abandoned and buried. Or perhaps, it is cherished and valued in the heart, but abandoned and buried in *practice*.<sup>114</sup>

What is common enough to be called the standard narrative encourages this mentality, rather than confront the inherent violence of a language shift (from Irish to English) of such dramatic proportions. The following passage by Declan Kiberd provides an instance of the standard narrative. While perfectly reasonable, it nonetheless forecloses the possibility of a more symptomatic reading:

It was, however, only in the mid nineteenth century, that the native language declined, not as an outcome of British policy so much as because an entire generation of the Irish themselves decided no longer to speak it. . . . To put the matter starkly, Irish declined only when the Irish people allowed it to decline. Brit-bashing mythology which cites the tally-stick, National Schools and Famine as the real causes was designed by politicians to occlude the painful truth, lest it cast a probing light on the contemporary situation, which is that Irish is still dying, still recoverable, but popular will to complete that recovery seems lacking.<sup>115</sup>

Kiberd is himself a non-native Irish speaker fluent in the language; his *Irish Classics* addresses many of these same issues. It might be possible to assess the above passage in terms of strategy: by demonstrating to the Irish the extent of their complicity in the demise of the language, they might yet be motivated to recover it. Still this approach elides any explanatory account of Irish linguistic collapse apart from, they 'decided no longer

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<sup>112</sup> By 'episteme' I mean that body of assumptions and givens specific to a particular historical context that underlie various discursive strategies and the objects of knowledge to which they give rise. This notion was deployed by Foucault, among others.

<sup>113</sup> Ngugi wa Thiong'o, 'The Language of African Literature' in *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*, 4-34. (London: James Curry Ltd., 1981), 13.

<sup>114</sup> Article 5 of 'Contexts/ *Comhthéacs*' of the Government Statement on the Irish Language 2006 reads: 'According to surveys and opinion polls most of the population believes that Irish is of particular importance to themselves personally and/or to the country as a whole'. Article 4, however, states: 'Irish is the main community and household language of 3% of the population'. The document is available at [www.pobail.ie](http://www.pobail.ie). Accessed 03/09/2010.

<sup>115</sup> Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1995), 616.

to speak it'. If there is no structural question and no institutionalised coercion: no ritual shaming, no punitive educational apparatus (tally-sticks, National Schools); no depopulation (Famine); and no systemic devaluations (British policy) to blame, then why did the Irish people simply 'allow it to decline'? While he does not believe this, Kiberd's brief account is still compatible with the idea that there is something inherently disagreeable, non-modern, or tedious about the language itself. A more demanding approach derives from Pierre Bourdieu, who asks the vexed question: what could possibly 'induce the holders of dominated linguistic competences to collaborate in the destruction of their instruments of expression?'<sup>116</sup> Bourdieu de-naturalizes the rhetoric of inevitability that saturates the dominant narrative and reinstates a measure of the catastrophe involved. He restores a sense of scale by asking: what convinces a people to destroy their own language?

It is more in alignment with Bourdieu's methodology than with Kiberd's then that we proceed. In his *Language and Symbolic Power*, Bourdieu explains how one language comes to attain 'legitimacy' at the expense of dialectical variants and other languages in a given social field. The becoming-illegitimate of all but the one language (in this instance, English) is a lengthy but decisive process. Speaking the legitimate language accrues benefits to the speaker (in the form of cultural capital, linguistic capital, social capital, etc.) to be spent on the so-called market. Gaining 'competence' in the legitimate language through national schools provides marketable skill sets, such as, for example, the increasingly reflexive ability of the speaker to modulate her usage depending on the level of capital held by the person with whom she is interacting (more, less, or roughly the same amounts).

'Illegitimate' languages, conversely, come to be associated with 'peasant values.' Indigenous languages in colonial contexts would appear to become permanently evacuated of all capital, so that even after formal independence they maintain their taint of illegitimacy, despite the sometimes protracted struggles of nationalists to boost the capital indigenous languages may command. The line of inquiry into such language change should not centre on why the Irish people chose English. In Bourdieu's terms, 'choice' would be too simplistic an ascription. Rather Bourdieu asks what interested violence has transpired and called itself a random, arbitrary result of modernity? As compelling as it is, Bourdieu's paradigm is constructed around the installation of official French in France and as such, it is not designed to account for the charged interface between an imperial language and an indigenous one. While a parallel could usefully be drawn between Bourdieu's official language/ *déclassé* dialect(s) and imperial language/ indigenous language, there are elements that escape this paradigm. For instance, the increasingly erratic disconnect between efforts meant to boost the national language (which I refer to henceforth as the ethos of preservation) and those which would confine its use literally to the farthest margins of the island.

Lacan would have called this disconnect a symptom. The symptom appears as something isolated, random, disruptive but self-contained, when in fact it gestures not toward an accident but toward a more fundamental, i.e., structural, 'malaise.' Slavoj Žižek defines the method of symptomal reading thus: '[It] consists in detecting a point of breakdown *heterogeneous* to a given ideological field and at the same time *necessary* for the field to achieve its closure, its accomplished form'.<sup>117</sup> In other words, Irish is the disavowed element which does not fit in the present world, yet it cannot be exorcised altogether, nor even approached directly, because its suppression is that which holds the post/colonial social field in place.

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<sup>116</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, ed. John B. Thompson, trans. Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), 49.

<sup>117</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), 21; original emphasis.

The symptom refers to those instances of disjuncture, of unresolved and unresolvable contradiction, which are disruptive of, but also ineradicable from, social reality itself. They provoke disproportionate gestures meant to contain them, though rather than outpace the symptoms, these gestures tend to make them worse. This is because resolving the contradiction once and for all would mean confronting the ‘error’ or ‘lapse’ at the foundation of the social order itself. Doing so would cause the social structure to collapse, because it relies for its own coherence on this unacknowledgeable ‘point of exception’.<sup>118</sup>

Moreover, symptoms proliferate, but they are experienced as isolated events, blips, autonomous disturbances, and thereby disguise the fact that they are necessary. The standard narrative suggests that Irish is enfeebled through a combination of its own internal deficiencies and the unsentimental, socio-cultural conjuncture in which we find ourselves. Such enfeeblement registers as a ‘local problem’ and a ‘random aberration’. Yet the disavowal of Irish, of which the ethos of preservation is a symptom and not a remedy, is not a ‘marginal malfunctioning’ of the postcolonial social order, but rather its ‘structural necessity’.<sup>119</sup> *In other words, the destruction of Irish is not accidental to, but constitutive of, the post/ colonial social order itself.* If the brokenness of Irish is not a ‘contingent error but a structural necessity’, then the correction of this problem is therefore unthinkable, because to truly correct the demise of Irish would be in effect to undo the social reality on whose corpse it is erected. In that sense, Irish revival efforts have not so much failed, as they are *already precluded* at the point of their inception.

The post/colonial state attempts to ameliorate and occlude its own structural antagonisms—for example its alignment with, and reinvestment in, extant colonial structures. It does so by means of over-large gestures meant to convey *post/colonial* rectification. For example, consider the bold language of Bunreacht na hÉireann: ‘The Irish language as the national language is the first official language’.<sup>120</sup> This must be weighed against the fact that almost no one speaks it. As Ruth Lysaght reports, ‘After 3186 hours of instruction over thirteen years, most school-leavers, according to the 1996 census, are unable to express themselves in Irish’.<sup>121</sup>

But it is a *gesture*, comes the response. It isn’t *really* the first language. Everyone *knows* it isn’t to be taken literally. According to Žižek, such symptomatology involves a knowing which is not-knowing, a diversionary short-circuit, such that at some level we do ‘know’, but we continue to *behave* as if we did not. A knowing which is not knowing is the basis of the ideological conundrum at the centre of the ‘post-ideological’ society, subverting as it does the normal parameters of epistemology.<sup>122</sup> We ‘know’ at some level that Irish has been unceremoniously surrendered to a prosperous post/colonial social order. So why all the energies toward preservation?<sup>123</sup> Arguably so that Irish does not find its way back—in some unruly, unforeseen way—and thus

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>119</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: the Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London: Verso, 1999), 131.

<sup>120</sup> ‘Bunreacht na hÉireann—Constitution of Ireland’, Article 8, no. 1.

<sup>121</sup> Ruth Lysaght, ‘Ar Oscailt-New Openings: Short Films in the Irish Language since the Advent of TG4’, in *The Representation of Ireland/s: Images from Outside and from Within*, ed. Rosa González (Barcelona: PPU, 2003), 150.

<sup>122</sup> For a detailed discussion see Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*.

<sup>123</sup> Recent legislation alone is prolific: The Official Languages Act 2003, the Education Act 1998, the Planning and Development Act 2000, and the Broadcasting Act 2001 are but a few. Údarás na Gaeltachta was established in 1980 and receives its annual funding from the Department of Community, Equality, and Gaeltacht Affairs. Its 2009 provision was 35.635million Euros at which time it employed 8,193 persons on a full-time basis. It aims to ‘develop the Gaeltacht economy in order to preserve and enrich the Irish language as the principal language therein’. Ciste na Gaeilge is funded by the national lottery and distributes proceeds to various



threaten comfortable, Anglophone social reality. This knowledge-as-non-knowledge is thematised throughout the short films of Daniel O'Hara (of whom more later).

Irish is preserved (which is not to be mistaken for the more anarchic, *spoken*) in order to satisfy not me or you, but the subject-supposed-to-believe. A Žižekian formulation,<sup>124</sup> the subject-supposed-to-believe is a figure for whom we keep up appearances, lest she be surprised and disturbed by the *real* reality in which we knowing agents move but which would be a source of contamination and upset for her. Žižek gives the example of Santa Claus. Parents invest in the innocence of the child, take pleasure in her enthusiasm and belief, and protect her from contact with the truth of Santa's inexistence. The child, meanwhile, believes in order to encourage her parents' obvious fulfilment and also, of course, to get the presents. The subject-supposed-to-believe in post/colonial Ireland is herself cushioned from the knowledge of which we bear the burden: Irish isn't *really* the official language. We maintain this seemingly benign fiction for the benefit of the subject-supposed-to-believe: *I don't believe, I know better, but I won't let on for her sake*. Such a figure need not actually exist—she probably doesn't—and if she does, she likely already knows. We will call out the stops on the Dublin bus in Irish as well as in English, not because there will be Irish speakers on board who will require such direction, but in case she happens to be there. We will similarly include Irish names on street signs in order to appease and protect the subject-supposed-to-believe.

The Official Languages Act of 2003 legislates the inclusion of Irish words on all street-signs in the Republic.<sup>125</sup> In respectable script, their presence is meant to signify 'parity of esteem' with English, if not primacy,<sup>126</sup> hence the relevant wording of the act:

(a) the text in the Irish language shall appear first, (b) the text in the Irish language shall not be less prominent, visible, or legible than the text in the English language, (c) the lettering of the text in the Irish language shall not be smaller in size than the lettering of the text in the English language, (d) the text in the Irish language shall communicate the same information as is communicated by the text in the English language, and (e) a word in the text in the Irish language shall not be abbreviated unless the word in the text in the English language, of which it is the translation, is also abbreviated.

Here we have the projection of linguistic redress and the illusion that Irish can be willed into Bourdieu's legitimacy without actually having to speak it. In symptomatic fashion, the bold occasion of Irish emblazoned on public signage is undercut by the fact that each sign is always-already translated into English. Does not the bilingual signage, with its apologetic translation, make a gesture only to retract it? Isn't Irish permitted to appear alongside the English, only because it need not be read or even noticed and because it becomes, effectively, a decorative hieroglyphics? The Irish does not interfere with transmission in the 'real' language. It does not complicate or block meaning (as all-Irish signage might). Instead a kind of visual vacuum, an amnesiac 'dead zone', opens up wherever the Irish words occur. The eye simply trains itself to skip past the Irish in order to

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Irish language organisations, such as Bord na Leabhar Gaeilge, Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann and Taibhdhearc na Gaillimhe and so on. ([www.pobail.ie](http://www.pobail.ie)). Accessed 03/09/2010.

<sup>124</sup> Drawn originally from Lacan, Žižek gives the concept a more decidedly socio-political inflection.

<sup>125</sup> Regulations 2008, Section 9 of the Official Languages Act 2003.

<sup>126</sup> There is no such corresponding legislation in the North of Ireland. *An Foras Teanga*, the North/South Implementation Body for language, was established as a result of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement in 1999. Organisations such as Pobal have been lobbying for an Irish Language Act for Northern Ireland as well as other advocacy activities in Belfast since their founding in 1998. See [www.pobal.org](http://www.pobal.org). Accessed 03/09/2010.

reach the ‘meaning’ of the sign, which as everyone knows (apart from the subject-supposed-to-believe) resides in the English.

To collectively agree to, and even insist on, Irish words on public signage is at once to proclaim, *this is important*, but then to carry on, to live, as if it were not important in the least. In a similar way, Žižek invokes the subject/ object who acts in my place. He gives the example of the TV laugh track which is delighted instead of me. Despite the fact that I do not laugh myself, I feel relieved and relaxed after an evening of such diversion. Žižek also convokes ‘weepers,’ (known as keeners in the Irish tradition) who are hired to mourn the dead. Keeners ululate, and statues and commemorations ‘remember’ the (Irish-speaking/ Famine) dead, so that I don’t have to. The objects of preservation, such as street signs with Irish words alongside the English ones, are effectively like a laugh track, chortling and applauding, so that I myself needn’t. Irish street signs and public transport announcements will speak Irish in my stead. They preserve the language so that I don’t have to. Preservation is a kind of embalming; even as it purports to be an extension of life, it cannot elide its funerary function.

It would be unthinkable that public signage was *only in Irish*, as this would come within dangerous proximity to social ‘undoing’. Bilingual signs guard against the ‘chaos’ which would engulf an all Irish-speaking Ireland—the thought of which provokes horror, because it would involve a ‘return’ to that atavism and disorder which occasioned colonialism in the first place. Ngugi describes the ‘cultural bomb’ of English in relation to African languages—and the internalization of colonial norms—thus: ‘It makes [the colonised] see their past as a wasteland of non-achievement and it makes them want to distance themselves from that wasteland. It makes them want to identify with that which is furthest removed from themselves; for instance, with other peoples’ languages rather than their own’.<sup>127</sup> If an Irish-speaking Ireland automatically signals a transmogrification to the awful thicket of unknowability, it is because this is how it first appeared to those with a civilising mission. The restoration of Irish is intolerable because it would be experienced as a retrogression to a kind of degree zero—hundreds of years of colonial ‘work’ radically unmade, a starting from scratch. To be precise, it would usher in a version of *colonial year one*. The instinctive recoil from ‘year one’ implicitly assumes that colonialism was/is, at some level a warranted—even largely beneficial—process. No one, not even Douglas Hyde, wanted an all-Irish speaking Ireland.

The proximity to undoing, announced as it is in the vigour of the symptom, makes for social ‘correctives’ that are increasingly contortionist and absurd. In a related way, we can see preservation dispersing the spectres of use. The efforts of the state to preserve Irish become not a trajectory lurching toward colonial year one as they may first appear, but a rather fevered attempt to avoid it at all costs. By way of his short film work, Daniel O’Hara has contributed to unravelling these uniquely post/colonial phenomena.

The Irish Film Board/*Bord Scannán na hÉireann* was closed between 1987 and 1993. Short film production, as opposed to the costlier venture of feature film, took over as the means for a film community to maintain itself, to continue working and to train newcomers.<sup>128</sup> Young filmmakers honed their craft with increasing skill at one of several programmes now gathered under the auspices of the Dublin Institute of Technology, of which Daniel O’Hara is a graduate. After 1998, the Oscailt (and Lasair) short film schemes (funded by *Bord Scannán na hÉireann* and TG4) were established to support indigenous talent and to meet

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<sup>127</sup> Ngugi, ‘The Language of African Literature’, 3.

<sup>128</sup> Martin McLoone, *Irish Film: the Emergence of a Contemporary Cinema*. London: British Film Institute, 2000, 152.

legislative demands for Irish language material. Numerous filmmakers availed themselves of such support and many high quality short films were produced in this way, though the schemes created a continuing situation in which, as Fidelma Farley points out, 'Strategic use [is] made of the schemes by filmmakers who have little interest in or knowledge of the language but wish to advance in the industry'.<sup>129</sup>

What is striking about O'Hara's productions is that they enfold this conundrum into the narratives themselves, adding a dimension of self-awareness that enlivens their satirical humour. As Farley notes, many of the Oscailt films are in Irish as if by chance, but could as easily have been in English or any other modern language. By contrast, O'Hara's work comments on the contradictions of modern Irish from the point of view of someone who both benefits from the promotional funds and critiques their incongruities. His widely acclaimed<sup>130</sup> *Yu Ming is Ainm Dom* ('My Name is Yu Ming')<sup>131</sup> tells the story of a young Chinese man whose dull life prompts him to strike out on an adventure. Quite impulsively, he decides to move to Ireland. He looks up the official language (*Gaeilge*) and teaches himself with cassette tapes before packing his things and flying to Dublin. Encouraged by the signage in Irish, he navigates the city with ease but becomes confused and depressed when no one can understand him. Ultimately, he relocates to the Gaeltacht.

The film explores what happens when someone appears who, quite ignorant of the protocols of linguistic preservation because he has been raised elsewhere, engages in unabashed, unembarrassed *use*. Yu Ming, unlike native Dubliners, does not 'know' how things really work. He therefore launches his Irish on the unsuspecting Anglophone<sup>132</sup> zone of contemporary Dublin and is quickly made to feel his error. In fact his containment and ultimate ostracism, while experienced as friendly enough, are nevertheless definitive.

O'Hara has created a postmodern Ireland in which the Irish language is all but entirely extinct. It is so postmodern that it features an Asian protagonist who relocates to Dublin, a true child of globalisation (he enjoys 'Taxi Driver' and borrows the language programme 'Gaeilge agus Fáilte' from his local Beijing library.) He is, as Fidelma Farley points out, a figure of transnational mobility. The ubiquity of the commodity form and the unrivalled dominance of the English language would appear to be complete, which is why Yu Ming's Irish (and simultaneously his *not*-English) both protrudes and discomfits. Symptom-like, it causes tremors in the social field in which he moves and tries, unsuccessfully, to integrate.

This is not an immigration tale in the traditional sense in which a newcomer seeks to negotiate the bigotry or racism around him. The fact that Yu Ming is a recent immigrant from China has no bearing whatsoever except inasmuch as the 'Irish' Other masquerades as an Asian Other. That is, O'Hara suggests that the Othering of Yu Ming is a species of self-loathing rather than xenophobia. Conflicts arise because Yu Ming is an Irish speaker, though his alien tongue is miscoded as Chinese. The subtext of self-loathing is especially noticeable in the second film, *Fluent Dysphasia*, and both films include the suggestion of internal colonisation. Yu Ming's Irish produces anxious responses from the Dubliners, who must extend themselves uncomfortably in

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<sup>129</sup> Fidelma Farley, 'Breac Scannáin/Speckled Films: Genre and Irish-language Filmmaking', in *Genre and Cinema: Ireland And Transnationalism*, ed. Brian McIlroy, 163-176. London: Taylor & Francis Ltd, 2007, 166.

<sup>130</sup> 'Yu Ming Is Ainm Dom' won an Irish Film and Television Award (IFTA) in 2004, the 'Audience Award' at both the Cork International Film Festival (2003) and the Galway Film Fleadh (2003), the Frank Copplestone First Time Director Award at the Celtic Film and Television Festival (2004) and the Jury Award at the Aspen Shortsfest (2004).

<sup>131</sup> *Yu Ming is Ainm Dom*. Directed by Daniel O'Hara. Dublin, Ireland: Dough Productions, 2003. [www.atomfilms.com](http://www.atomfilms.com).

<sup>132</sup> Though many languages can now be heard in Dublin, from Eastern European to African, the language of interaction is still presumed to be English.

order to grasp, interpret, and situate him. He unnerves them, and they visibly work to neutralise whatever echoes or threats his unexpected Irish might augur in terms of Lacanian undoing. The film is a meditation, in other words, on how the post/colonial social order attempts to ‘accommodate’ Yu Ming’s linguistic errancy.

Yu Ming is listless and bored in his job as a corner-store attendant in Beijing. We see him too bored even to produce correct change. He plays a game of chance one day involving a globe in order to imagine and then enact a livelier fate for himself. The friction from his fingertip stops the spinning orb at Ireland, and never having thought of the place before, he visits the library to consult an atlas. ‘Ireland,’ it says. ‘Population: 4 million’. ‘Capital city: Dublin’. ‘Official language: Irish’.

The conceit, of course, is that of an innocent who takes the state at its word. He is a version of the subject-supposed-to-believe. Yu Ming accepts at face value the notion that Irish is in fact the first official language, hence his statement: ‘*D’fhoghlaim mé an teanga mar ba mhaith liom a bheith i mo chónaí in Éirinn.*’ (‘I learned Irish, because I wanted to live in Ireland’).<sup>133</sup>

The youths who work at the Dublin hostel are welcoming enough. They too are embodiments of transnational mobility. One is from Australia and the other Mongolia, and they have understood and assimilated to the requirements of a global capitalism in a way that Yu Ming has not: their English is adequate, largely unstilted and appropriate to their work situations; they are moderately skilled but not very; they are cheerful and considerate but not overbearing; and they have grasped at opportunities in the Celtic Tiger-era service sector to good personal effect. They have achieved Bourdieu’s competence<sup>134</sup> which Yu Ming is in the midst of bungling.

This encounter with other comparatively more successful transnational figures quickly degenerates into a series of illogical compensations for the fact that a cavernous communication gap opens up when Yu Ming makes the simple but incomprehensible request: *Ba mhaith liom leaba anseo.* (‘I would like a bed here’.) They include increased volume and exaggerated pronunciation: ‘HOW . . . WAS . . . YOUR . . . FLIGHT?’ and so on. Yu Ming looks blankly on the Australian youth who flaps his ‘wings’ to signal air travel. A lesser filmmaker might rely on the clichéd comedies of miscommunication alone, but O’Hara goes further. He presents Irish as a symptomatic irruption in both the bafflement it creates and the impulse to contain it that ensues.

The Mongolian is recruited to ‘translate’ but he does not understand the language either. *Ba mhaith liom leaba anseo* must be Chinese, he opines, whereas ‘I’m Mongolian’. Therefore, ‘Sorry, Mate, I don’t speak Chinese’ is the cordial but concluding pronouncement imposed on the scene by the hostel worker(s). After a glimmer of panic, all is well again. The symptom of Yu Ming’s Irish is successfully drained of virulence as the hostel workers interpret and ‘translate’ him. They deduce his intentions—‘He probably wants a bed,’ says the Mongolian youth, the sharper of the two—and integrate him thus, while at the same time expunging the Irish language altogether.

The subsequent scenes dramatise Yu Ming’s isolation. Dinner becomes a lonesome failure. The indecipherable knife and fork mark him out further, materialising his ostracism. He is forced to turn them upside down, creating makeshift chopsticks and clumsily trying to negotiate the roasted vegetables on his plate. After walking alone on the streets of Dublin, he arrives at the banks of the Grand Canal and sits on the bench beside

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<sup>133</sup> What Pierre Bourdieu refers to as the official language is decisively *not* the official language here, erecting a disjuncture in which despite its name – official – Irish does not coincide with the *legitimate* language, as would typically be the case. The official language in practice normally coincides with the legitimate one.

<sup>134</sup> They have mastered Althusser’s *bien parler* for that matter, which is similar in some respects to Bourdieu’s competence. See ‘Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses’, 89.

the statue of Patrick Kavanagh. It is thus with a mute companion in compounded silence that he lingers; O'Hara 'amplifies' the absence of language. Yu Ming looks at Patrick Kavanagh and is powerless to provoke a response. Still he improbably channels Travis Bickle for the second time in the film: *An bhfuil tusa ag leabhairt liomsa?*, he asks. ('You talkin' to me?')

The cosmic/comic refusal that follows (statues don't speak and the Irish don't speak Irish) is further redounded in the fact that the Monaghan poet, for a series of complex reasons, was unsympathetic to the language revival movement. As one biographer writes, 'Some are unwilling to junk the Irish language and its historical associations as Kavanagh did: he was opposed to the requiring of Irish in the schools, and he felt that if misguided people wished to study the language, they should be free to do so, but it was their own problem'.<sup>135</sup>

These instances of failure contrast sharply with Yu Ming's Dublin airport experience, in which he needs only to 'interact' with signs, signs he finds instructive and reassuring because they are (half) in Irish. In an inversion of the previous discussion of bilingual signs, Yu Ming reads the Irish. For him, it is the English words which are 'invisible', or if visible only strange, Derridean glyphs. It is not until Yu Ming must speak to another person that his edifice of language proficiency collapses. This inability to sustain linguistic proficiency *with people* suggests in itself a dissonance within the logic of preservation. It also returns us directly to the concept of Irish as a symptom (rather than as functioning language.) What the state's ethos confuses is the difference between preservation and usage, encouraging slippage between the two, which despite a seeming overlap are in fact quite different.

O'Hara deploys a quasi-Wittgensteinian subtext regarding the inescapable sociality of language.<sup>136</sup> Yu Ming enacts the impossibility of maintaining a language that is socially incoherent and confined to an interior space of mere self-reflexivity. Indeed O'Hara constructs an implicit argument against linguistic privacy, since 'language'—without any criteria of external corroboration or any reference outside itself—can neither endure over time nor generate 'meaning' in the usual sense of the word. The Irish of the ethos of preservation works as an impossible private language in O'Hara's films (that is, one not spoken; effectively disavowed socially; and incomprehensible to most everyone), and therefore cannot really be called a 'language' *at all*. According to Derrida, a language needs at least three people to achieve 'iterability'—the sender, the receiver, and a third party outside the first two. It appears to Yu Ming in post/colonial Dublin, that there is only him.<sup>137</sup>

At this point, Yu Ming ventures into a neighbourhood pub in search of a job. Consider O'Hara's satirical ferocity: the sage Irish speaker Yu Ming meets there—the only other Irish speaker in the film—is an old man, drinking Guinness at midday, who goes by the name of 'Paddy'. When Yu Ming first arrives, he is met by the barman with the same pantomiming and over-loud words as before: 'What? Do You? Want to drrrink?'

He utters sweet and incongruous phrases in response, such as *'Tá brón orm nach bhfuil mo Ghaeilge níos fear.'* (I'm sorry my Irish is not better'). And as if in explanation, *'Tháinig mé go hÉirinn inné.'* ('I just arrived in Ireland yesterday'). Recognising the language, Paddy calls Yu Ming over and orders a couple of pints.

<sup>135</sup> Darcy O'Brien, *Patrick Kavanagh*, (London: Associated University Presses, 1975), 67. It is not clear whether or not O'Hara knew Kavanagh's feeling about the language, though they contrast appropriately with Brendan Behan's, whose personage, if not his statue, would have been more supportive, and better still, Irish-speaking. Even the posture of his likeness on the banks of the Royal Canal, is less aloof, more convivial, and more suggestive of *comhrá* than that of the stoic Kavanagh.

<sup>136</sup> I have based this segment very loosely on the private language argument of Wittgenstein. Irish, as it functions in contemporary Ireland, may as well be 'made up'. See the Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (London: Blackwell, 1967).

<sup>137</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Signature, Event, Context', *Limited, Inc.* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 1988): 1-24.

He proceeds to explain to the despondent Yu Ming why he has failed to fit into his adopted country. The ensuing dialogue unfolds in a kind of phenomenological slow motion, as O'Hara telegraphs the depths of the absurdity therein. Yu Ming despairs to Paddy that it was a mistake to come, that he speaks Irish terribly, and that no one can understand him.

PADDY: *Tá Gaeilge níos fearr agat ná an cuid is mó daoine sa tír seo.*

(‘You have better Irish than most people in this country’.)

YU MING: *Ní thuigim.* (‘I don’t understand’.)

PADDY: *Labhraítear Bearla anseo.* (‘English is spoken here’.)

YU MING: *Bearla?* (‘English?’)

PADDY: *Bearla . . . ó Shasana.* (‘English. . . from England’.)

YU MING: *Ní labhraítear Gaeilge?* (‘Irish isn’t spoken?’)

PADDY: *Ní labhraítear.* (‘It isn’t’.)

YU MING: *Ach gach fogra—* (‘But on every sign—’)

PADDY: *Bhuel, tá an teanga ann ach ní labhraítear í ach i gcúpla ceantar in Éirinn.* (‘Well, the language is there, but it’s not spoken . . . except for a few regions in Ireland’.)

The scene ends when one barman says to the other: ‘Who knew that old Paddy could speak Chinese?’

Paddy, in this pivotal scene, is important for several reasons. Firstly, he disabuses Yu Ming of the notion that his Irish is poor, ungrammatical, too unschooled. He discounts the notion that Yu Ming’s experience of himself as a deviation is somehow the result of ‘a local problem’ rather than a structural complaint; secondly, Paddy and Yu Ming come remarkably close to ‘articulating the inarticulable’ in this scene because they dialogically unravel those deflected knowledges, the sublation of which has been the basis of Yu Ming’s symptomatology all along; and finally, Paddy informs Yu Ming about the existence, far away, of zones of permissible Irish, the Gaeltachts. The existence of the Gaeltachts works to subvert any epiphanic assimilation of those unraveled, deflected knowledges that might threaten the social order with disintegration. (‘If we come to “know too much”, to pierce the true functioning of social reality, this reality would dissolve itself’.)<sup>138</sup> O’Hara implies that this is broadly the case, as well as the case for Yu Ming. The Gaeltachts function rather like aboriginal reservations. They provide the ultimate quarantine of the symptomatic, Irish-speaking body and its indigenous speech acts.

In fact, the indigenous speech act that was disruptive in Dublin can be assimilated to a touristic-imperative in the Gaeltachts that is not only made harmless there but lucrative. This is how Yu Ming’s ungovernable Irish is assimilated to a programme of (p)reservation and also how the symptom is subordinated to the requirements of capitalist post/colonialism, which prove to be one and the same thing. Yu Ming is personally willing to accept his aberrations as a local problem rather than a structural necessity, and this is why he is vulnerable to a pressure toward self-expulsion, to voluntary self-exile.

Finally apprised of the geographies of authorized Irish, the final sequence features Yu Ming’s journey to the unsullied West. It is the first time we hear the sounds of traditional music. The last shot tracks a couple of

<sup>138</sup> Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 21.

tourists, probably American, milling into a pub. Yu Ming is behind the bar, from where he exclaims in previously unusable Irish, ‘*Fáilte romhat á Connemara. Conas atá sibh?*’ (Welcome to Connemara! How are ye?)

In her article on the Irish Film Board shorts, of which ‘Yu Ming’ is by far the most successful, Farley reads the scene as a felicitous resolution to Yu Ming’s lonely troubles. Indeed, he appears to be in his element, and the film ends on that cheerful note. Yu Ming is able to find ultimate solace, a zone of consolation, in the Gaeltacht. However, O’Hara is ambivalent about the reification of the Gaeltachts as sources of tourist revenue and sites of cultural consumption. A true fringe, the Gaeltacht is curated as it were from the far remove of Dublin. Sequestered in the great museum space of the West, Irish and Irishness become part of the (p)reservation effort, and Gaelgeoir and Gaeltacht alike are made over as part of an elaborate set-piece with the Irish language as its central curiosity. And again, the Gaeltacht is the ultimate amelioration of the Irish symptom, because it not only contains the language but is generative of tourist dollars. Yu Ming avoids causing further disruption and even makes himself useful, dispensing Irish phrases to eager foreign visitors.

Yet O’Hara transmits his unease about Yu Ming’s resettlement. This option only presents itself as compelling because Yu Ming cannot assimilate in Dublin. In that sense it is a consolidation, and not a correction, of his ostracism. By removing Irish to the literal margins, where ostensibly it belongs, the post/colonial social order may produce and reproduce itself in peace.

I want to shift now to another Irish-speaking figure in contemporary Dublin, the protagonist of O’Hara’s second short film, *Fluent Dysphasia* (2004).<sup>139</sup> Michael Murphy, unlike Yu Ming, is well aware of the protocols of ‘preservation’. Having been brought up in post/colonial Ireland, he has internalised them to a degree of unthinking reflex. There is no confusion in Michael Murphy’s mind: Irish is the illegitimate cousin to the properly legitimate English. Which is why he is utterly mortified when after a night of hard drinking he awakens to find he can only speak Irish. He ‘knows’ only too well that such unfettered use is tantamount to social suicide, but because of a random misfortune (a blow to the head, as it happens), he is left desperate but unable to auto-translate. Accordingly, he cannot adjust or assimilate, so he persists in his weird social excess (i.e., his symptomatic Irish), like the pariah he effectively becomes. Michael Murphy, cum Mícheál Ó Muirchú, ceases to function *almost entirely*, until he is ‘delivered’ unto another language.

Mícheál is much more neurotic and unruly in his Irish-speaking than Yu Ming. He thrashes and flails against his unenviable state, physically enacting contemporary anxiety about the Irish-speaking body. Mícheál channels the hysteria of Anglophone Ireland, of which he himself is a complacent part. The comedy is partially derived from the fact that he is *still* anxious and hysterical, even though it is his own body doing the (Irish) speaking, and not that of an Other. It is self-loathing that he plunges into upon finding he can no longer speak English. Mícheál, the Irish speaker, becomes more and more socially disabled until he finally degenerates into a kind of child-like helplessness.

In the opening scene, the teen-aged daughter of Michael (not yet Mícheál at this point) asks for help with her Irish homework. ‘Sure, I never had a word of Irish’ is his reply. Having thus established his ignorance of the language, it is all the more comedic when, half-blinded by a hangover the next morning, he staggers to the ringing phone. Not knowing anything is wrong until he actually speaks (either his thoughts are not in Irish or he

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<sup>139</sup> *Fluent Dysphasia*. Directed by Daniel O’Hara. Dublin, Ireland: Dough Productions, 2004. [www.atomfilms.com](http://www.atomfilms.com).

doesn't have any – another Wittgensteinian nod to the non-interiority of language), he lifts the receiver and says: '*Dia duit. Mícheál Ó Muirchú anseo.*' He jerks the phone away from his face as if it has burned him.

Mícheál is panic-stricken, as Irish keeps escaping from his open mouth. Upon a cautious second try, he gets the same result: '*Dia duit*' ('Hello') and then '*Cé atá ansin?*' ('Who is it?'). Horrified, he clicks off the phone and throws it onto the kitchen table. Irish manifests as a true excess here. It is almost as if it were a spillage, overcoming the bounds of his mouth. He speaks again: '*Is mise Mícheál . . . Cad é a thainig orm?*' ('I'm Michael . . . What's become of me?')

As Mícheál shuffles to the train station, reeling in the fog of sore head and confusion, the viewer has time to appreciate the magnitude of his sudden symptomatology and all its social ramifications. As with Yu Ming, it is when the protagonist must deal with someone outside himself that his problem is fully aggravated:

DART CLERK: Where are you going to? . . . Hello?! Pal? Where to?

MÍCHEÁL: (muttering) *Bothar Chlontarf*. (Clontarf Road).

DART CLERK: Where?

MÍCHEÁL: (under his breath) *Bothar Chlontarf*.

DART CLERK: Do you want a ticket or not? What station are you going to?

MÍCHEÁL: (shouting) *Bothar Chlontarf!!*

DART CLERK: Ohhhhh, you're *Gaeilgeoir* . . . I love the Irish, me.

He says this last as if admiring its twee quality. An exasperated Mícheál snatches up the ticket, pays for it, and hurries away. '*Go n-éirí an bóthar leat!*' ('May the road rise to meet you!') and all that,' the DART clerk calls after him. '*Céad míle fáilte!*' ('A hundred thousand welcomes!') The language is humorously but squarely confined to its form of mass-produced, greeting-card banality. The clerk repeats a common strategy of containment which is to circumscribe the language to a tourist phantasm, a mediocre commodity of rurality and kitsch. Irish has no place in the real world.

Ultimately, Mícheál arrives at the house of Sean—with whom he'd been on a drinking bout the previous night—and from whom he must extract information about what events precipitated his personal disaster. Predictably, though, they cannot negotiate a meaningful exchange. The viewer sees a close-up of Sean's face out of which English is spouting like gibberish, as the camera represents Mícheál's point of view. His speech is a garbled anti-language, a contorted blah-blah-blah, which is followed by Mícheál's dawning realisation that not only can he just speak Irish, he can no longer understand English. '*Ní thuigim Bearla,*' he pronounces gravely.

Despite our view of Sean's jabbering mouth, it is Mícheál who is actually the figure trapped in glossolalia, he who is speaking 'a meaningless sequence of non-words'.<sup>140</sup> This is the case even though he is speaking grammatical Irish, because he is unintelligible to everyone around him. O'Hara suggests that glossolalia is precisely the state of Irish in contemporary Dublin. Meaningfully, it would seem, glossolalia either manifests in schizophrenic breaks or else trance-like religious ecstasies.<sup>141</sup> The first is an appropriate description, since Mícheál has become, for all intents and purposes, mad and babbling. He repeats in blind

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<sup>140</sup> Jean-Jacques Lecercle, *Interpretation as Pragmatics* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 187.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, 190.



panic: ‘*Ní labhairt ag ceart*’ (‘I can’t speak properly!’) and ‘*Cad é a tharla dom?*’ (‘What happened to me?’). Sean’s stunned remarks similarly measure Mícheál’s increasing social debility, as when he says, ‘Talk proper, will you, Murph?!’ ‘Murph’ answers with the pleading: ‘*Ní focail Bearla agam.*’ (‘I haven’t a word of English’.)

After Mícheál, in a burst of desperation, manhandles Sean whilst shrieking—‘*Cad é a tharla aréir? Cad é a tharla dom?*’ (‘What happened last night? What happened to me?!’)—Sean runs inside his flat and locks the door. In an inversion of the religious mode (from beatific ecstasy to satanic possession), Sean decides Mícheál’s glossolalia is a kind of devil-speak. He says from the letter slot: ‘I don’t know what’s wrong with you, Murph. But you’re scaring me. I think you might be possessed. You need to get professional help. I’d like to help you, but . . . I’m not a professional’. Sean pushes a crucifix out, brandishing it as best he can within the limited dimensions of the letter slot, saying ‘Devil be gone!’. Mícheál, meanwhile, incants: ‘*Cad é a tharla aréir?!?*’

‘The power of Christ compels you!’ creaks Sean. ‘The power of Christ compels you!’

Ultimately, Mícheál is forced to turn to his school-aged daughter, Jane, the representative of that reluctant demographic upon whom the language is more or less totally displaced. He seeks her help; she is the only (other) Irish speaker in the film. Mícheál’s further descent is depicted in an impromptu lesson on a park bench, where she decides that with her assistance he will re-learn English. There is playground equipment in the background and tinkling music plays. Mícheál balances a toddler’s board-book on his knees while Jane looks on. She points at the pictures:

JANE: Apple.

MÍCHEÁL: Aaabbel.

JANE: Balloon.

MÍCHEÁL: B’looon.

JANE: Cake.

MÍCHEÁL: C-C-Caay. . . ke.

JANE: *Maith an Fear!* (‘Good man!’)

It is not until Mícheál turns the page and is surprised by a triangular pink pop-up that he remembers himself. He throws the book on the ground and shouts ‘*Chan fhuil sé go leor! Cha dtig liom é seo a fhoghlaim ó thúis arís. Cad é a dhéanfaidh mé? Níl mé ábalta labhairt le daoine!*’ (‘It’s not enough! I can’t learn this from scratch. What will I do? I can’t speak to anyone!’)

He storms off. Mícheál grows increasingly dependent on his bilingual daughter to mediate between himself and the wider world. When he sits depressed, almost immobile, at the kitchen table in the final scene, the viewer gets the sense that he has not ventured out-of-doors since the playground incident. The ‘problem’ of Irish is somewhat self-correcting at this late stage. With enough negative reinforcement, Yu Ming and Mícheál have removed themselves from their crippling situations, either to the Gaeltacht or the confines of a dark, Dublin flat. They do not have to be carted away, in other words, despite the ‘madness’ to which their positions consign them. Mícheál endures the ultimate containment, which is complete social breakdown.

‘Dysphasia’ is categorised as a pathology, a malfunction in the ability to use or understand language. But O’Hara suggests that it is not Mícheál but post/colonial Irish society that is dysphasic. The Irish symptom is

displaced in numerous ways, as we see in regard to Yu Ming, often to the margins of the far West, effectively banishing Irish speakers to rural locales. Fittingly, Pierre Bourdieu writes that the word ‘patois,’ which came to be associated with the peasantry, originally meant ‘incomprehensible speech.’

In a similar vein, Patricia Palmer explains the derivation of the word barbarism: ‘Barbarism itself, etymologically rooted in barbarous, the babbling outsider unable to speak Greek, is a concept grounded in linguistic difference’.<sup>142</sup> Of the representation of the Irish language in early colonial discourse, she writes:

It is hardly an exaggeration to say that the Elizabethan texts make Irish-speakers mute. But what remains when speech is denied is not necessarily silence. The mute are not noiseless and these texts are full of strange, disturbing sounds: cries, yelps, groans, strangled shouts, whispers. . . . There is nothing casual about downgrading words into cries, transforming the meanings of another language into babble. The barbarian has ever been heard to mumble: bar, bar, bar.<sup>143</sup>

What might have foundered—an over-stretched colonial dream of an English-only island where barbarous tongues ceased to erupt—would appear to have been realised in the post/colonial present. The Irish themselves, these films suggest, are the ones who find the indigenous language offensive and strange, impossible, and even suggestive of barbarism. Indeed, in O’Hara’s postmodern Dublin, spoken Irish is mistakeable for Chinese, Beelzebub-spew, glossolalic babble, a preserve of geriatrics and at the same time, socially infantilising.

To conclude, I return once more to Žižek and this time to his Lacanian notion of phantasy. Phantasy in the Lacanian lexicon is not a screen sweetening and obscuring reality. Rather it is the supplement that supports and maintains reality; it plays a crucial ideological role in propping up the ‘public symbolic order’. Phantasy often emerges in the form of rules which though unwritten are still coercive:

The need for the phantasmic support of the public symbolic order (materialised in the so-called unwritten rules) thus bears witness to the system’s vulnerability: the system is compelled to allow for possibilities of choices which must never actually take place, since their occurrence would cause the system to disintegrate, and the function of the unwritten rules is precisely to prevent the actualization of these choices actually allowed by the system.<sup>144</sup>

Theoretically, we could all speak Irish at any time and in any situation. That possibility remains, despite the fact that we will not speak Irish when what is called for is English. The example of the ‘public symbolic order’ here requiring a supplement to maintain its integrity would be the official declaration of Irish as the first language of the Republic, whereas the phantasy would be the unwritten rule saying a collective eye-roll where Irish is concerned is much more appropriate than actual use. In cases such as this, Žižek argues, it would be *more radical* to follow the letter of the law, instead of the unwritten dictates of the phantasmic support, and thereby perform what Lacan called a ‘traversing of the phantasy’. The thing to do, according to this paradigm, is to take the state at its word as did Yu Ming, rather than yield to the cynical distance afforded by the phantasy. Žižek writes: ‘In accomplishing this act, the subject suspends the phantasmic frame of unwritten rules which tell

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<sup>142</sup> Patricia Palmer, *Language and Conquest in Early Modern Ireland: English Renaissance Literature and Elizabethan Imperial Expansion* (Cambridge, Cambridge UP: 2001), 24.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid., 64, 66.

<sup>144</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (London: Verso, 1997), 38.

him how to choose freely – no wonder the consequences of this act are so catastrophic'.<sup>145</sup> It is arguably disruptive *in itself* to speak Irish in unauthorised, unexpected contexts. Speaking Irish when you would normally speak English is a provocation, in part because it disrupts the transparency on which capitalist post/colonialism relies. People cannot start speaking Irish instead of English without an edifice cracking. While a single person will be marginalised in her Irish speaking (as Yu Ming and Mícheál are), many people speaking Irish is another matter. In accordance with Žižek, the meaningful choice then is to follow the law to its letter: if Irish is the first official language of the Republic, then that is what I shall speak.

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<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 40.

## 2. Bad Subjects: Language and Interpellation in the Irish Post/Colony

On an evening in 2007 outside a South Belfast pub, a 24-year old woman, Máire Nic An Bhaird, was arrested and charged with disorderly conduct because she addressed the officer on patrol in the Irish (Gaelic) language. He would later claim that she had spoken in an abusive manner, and that he had mistaken her words, ‘*Tiocfaidh bhur lá*’ (‘You will get your chance’—presumably, to speak) for ‘*Tiocfaidh ar lá*,’ (‘Our day will come’) a slogan associated with republican sympathies and even support for the provisional IRA. Nic An Bhaird’s defence rested on the argument that she should not be penalised for speaking her own language in her own country. Language activists demonstrating outside the Belfast Magistrate Courts at her trial deployed a similar vocabulary: as Nic An Bhaird was a Gaelscoil<sup>146</sup> teacher living in a Gaeltacht community, and as her daily language was Irish, she could therefore not be punished for communicating in the language in which she was immersed. After admitting there was nothing criminal about speaking Irish in itself, ruling Magistrate Fiona Bagnall shifted emphasis from the language to the manner in which it was spoken. She stated, ‘I’m satisfied that the defendant continued to address police officers in a loud and aggressive manner. I therefore find her guilty of disorderly behaviour’.<sup>147</sup> Whether or not she spoke Irish politely or aggressively is beside the point; whether or not Irish, as a ‘lesser spoken’ or minority language protected by the European Charter,<sup>148</sup> was insulted is also not the issue. The ordeal of Nic An Bhaird is symptomatic of broader concerns. Nic An Bhaird was ultimately acquitted on appeal, but her case hints at unresolved tensions peculiar to the (Northern Irish) post/colonial context.

There *is* something disorderly—even violent, though in a highly deflected way—about an Irish speaker speaking in a vigorously Anglophone setting. One could suppose that Nic An Bhaird spoke to the officer in Irish *because it was disruptive*—disruption and confusion being not accidental to the exchange but central. Otherwise, we would have to assume that she misunderstood the context in which she was speaking, i.e. she accidentally spoke Irish to an English-speaking officer, which is unlikely. What Máire Nic An Bhaird was guilty of was speaking Irish in what J. L. Austin would have called ‘conditions of infelicity’,<sup>149</sup> – that is, Anglophone South Belfast. We know what language to speak and how to speak it depending on the social capital of the person with whom we are interacting. Pierre Bourdieu called this ability ‘competence’ and that environment, in which we are steeped from birth and which gives us such ‘automatic’ knowledge, our ‘habitus’.<sup>150</sup> The boundaries between conditions of felicity and conditions of infelicity are no less clearly drawn in the post/colonies than elsewhere, though they are more likely to be contested there, especially insofar as an imperial language has rendered the indigenous language arcane and offensive.<sup>151</sup> There are no more monoglot speakers in

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<sup>146</sup> An Irish-language medium school.

<sup>147</sup> “Irish Language Teacher in Belfast Guilty of Disorderly Behaviour.” *Breakingnews.ie*. 26 Feb. 2007. Web. 15/09/2010.

<sup>148</sup> The United Kingdom ratified Irish in Northern Ireland as a protected language under the Council of Europe’s European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, 1992.

<sup>149</sup> See J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things With Words* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962).

<sup>150</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, trans. Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991.), 49.

<sup>151</sup> The systematic destruction of Irish began in earnest with the Statutes of Kilkenny (1366), in which the language was officially outlawed by the British state. Some two hundred years later, in his ‘A View to the Present State of Ireland’ (1596), Edmund Spenser would further crystallise the argument that so long as the Irish kept their language, they would remain a barbaric and irredeemable people. The key to successful colonisation then would be the breaking of the native language: ‘It hath ever been the use of the conquerors to despise the

Ireland, and there would almost never be an occasion in which speaking that language to someone, especially a person with more social capital than one's own, would be a 'competent' move. Speaking Irish is almost always brought to bear *against* one's habitus, then, and thus requires special effort. If it is very nearly *always* ill-advised to speak it, then why does Nic An Bhaired feel compelled to do so? It cannot benefit her in any way. On the contrary, it will cause her extreme difficulty, including arrest, trial, conviction, and only later acquittal. The conditions of felicity in South Belfast, and more so the constitutive role of *English* in consolidating those conditions, were perhaps an impetus, however conscious or not, for Nic An Bhaired's 'protest'. Yet an improved minority-rights status would do nothing to change the conditions themselves through which Irish was made obsolescent or 'lesser spoken' in the first place. Though her defence and the media depoliticised the incident and worked it into a neoliberal vocabulary of rights discourse, Nic An Bhaired's act still retains a performative echo of previous strategies that were more overtly political and which drew on the indigenous language as a means to disrupt the everyday social relations of militarised imperial-capitalism under which its subjects laboured.

How should we understand spoken Irish in such hostile contexts? In the following, I explore three cultural products (a poem and two film clips) that depict a similarly structured interchange between an English-speaking officer and a non-compliant Irish speaker. The first two scenarios display the pitfalls of this linguistic strategy inasmuch as what is being attempted is resistance for its own sake rather than the more radical goal of rupture and transformation. It is only the final scenario that aspires to this further objective. While it ends in violence and tragedy, it constructs the most fruitful paradigm, I will argue, for developing a linguistic praxis in the post/colonies and beyond.

Each scene might be taken as an allegory for nationalist politics as they have so far been practiced. The first allegorises the way in which the identities ('ethnic', 'authentic', etc.) championed by any nationalist politics are always-already commodified and so serve to eclipse the act of rebellion. The same interconnections between militarism, the state and the market continue to manage threatening discontent even after independence is granted. The second piece depicts the post/colonial 'dependence' on identitarianism and the concomitant translation of restless energies into games of cat-and-mouse wherein both parties indulge their *jouissance* for urban battle and for playing the 'bad' subject. The final scene is the only one that embodies what David Lloyd has called 'nationalism *against the state*.'<sup>152</sup> It is arguably the only postcolonial politics that works to negate the colonial legacy rather than think emancipation through it.<sup>153</sup>

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language of the conquered, and to force him by all means to use his'. Edmund Spenser quoted in Tony Crowley, *Language in History: Theories and Texts* (London: Routledge 1996), 102. By 1901, we know that no more than 14% of the population of the entire island (North and South) identified as Irish speakers (13.3% in 1926), and even those figures do not measure levels of fluency or distinguish between native speakers and learners. See Reg Hindley, *The Death of the Irish Language: a qualified obituary* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 1990), 23. In many respects, then, Spenser's vision for a re-formed Ireland would come to pass, but not before successive campaigns of violence, which were considered the necessary counterpart to linguistic colonisation: 'For Spenser, the agent of civilisation was military and judicial violence. A violent conquest would be followed by a prolonged period of martial law before the successful imposition of the English law became practicable'. See D. Alan Orr 'From a View to a Discovery: Edmund Spenser, Sir John Davies and the Defects of Law in the Realm of Ireland' *Canadian Journal of History: Annales canadiennes d'histoire*, 38.3 (2003): 395-408.

<sup>152</sup> See his article of the same name collected in *Ireland After History* (Cork: Cork UP in association with Field Day, 1999): 19-36.

<sup>153</sup> The first two texts are set in the North while the more 'successful' paradigm is set in the pre-independent South. However, this locational difference does not provide an adequate reason for why the tactic works in one place and not the other. One possibly meaningful but not necessarily decisive distinction is that in the final text, a 'revolution' is *underway*, though it will be markedly incomplete—a measure of which is the *creation* of the

Irish-speaking may not be disruptive in itself but may become so under certain circumstances—for example, when what has been demanded by a British soldier of an unruly indigene is evidence of a reformed subjectivity. This is not far removed from Louis Althusser’s famous ‘scene of interpellation’ because what is being tested, so to speak, is the individual’s willingness not only to defer to the law—to turn when it calls, to honour its judgments, to accede to the place it holds out—but also the willingness to demonstrate that deference variously, repeatedly, and at any time. In other words, to become a subject. The subject inaugurated by the interpellative hail of the British soldier is a subject who behaves according to certain reproductive dictates of capital and the colonial state, central to which is that she *speak English*, and not an abyssal tongue, a linguistic black hole, such as Irish. Irish then is precisely what the disaffected youths of Belfast, Derry, (and colonized Cork in 1920) utter in the place of English in these texts.

In what Althusser called his ‘little theoretical theatre’,<sup>154</sup> the *mise en scene* of interpellation is inaugurated by a hail from the voice of Law. (It) says, “Hey, you there!” and I stop. As I recognise myself as the addressee—recognise that it is indeed I (and no one else) who is being hailed—I turn around. It is in my turn to face the Law that I am interpellated as a subject, and I clinch the process (oftentimes eagerly) with the linguistic suture, “Yes” (It is I). This process of subjectivation (*assujettissement*) bears the double register of the term ‘subject’, since it refers both to one who is subjected (subject to the rules, subject to the Crown, etc.) and also to the ‘subject’ as the seat of volition, the centre of initiatives. Althusser’s theoretical intervention ably stages the paradox that one must make the *free choice* to submit to her non-freedom; she must subject herself in order to become a subject.

### *Hush-a-Bye, Baby*<sup>155</sup>

The 1990 film by Margot Harkin, ‘Hush-a-Bye, Baby’, produced by the Derry Film and Video Workshop, chronicles the life of Goretti, a young woman who becomes pregnant but cannot secure an (illegal) abortion. Her obscure eponym, that of a Catholic saint, has marked her from the beginning with an inescapable and apparently suffocating relationship to religion. Her boyfriend Ciarán, the child’s father, has indeterminate Republican leanings but no clear IRA connections. Ultimately, though, he disappears into the bowels of the British military apparatus and thus from Goretti’s life. Prior to his indefinite internment, however, Ciarán has several encounters with British soldiers, the first of which contains no language at all. It is a hurried body search in the night, followed by a wordless dismissal. In his second encounter with the troops, he attempts to perform a linguistic (rather than physical) resistance to the soldier’s interpellation, a behaviour which Harkin presents as an analogue to Republican violence.

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North and those very conditions in which the first two protagonists are caught. Yet neither is the South ‘redeemed’ by independence. In the current conjuncture, it is true that the Irish language bears a different affective register in the North than it does in the South. In the North, it can still carry a political charge, a quality of defiant indigeneity that it lacks in the contemporary South. Despite being named the official language in the Irish Constitution, Irish is consistently a matter of indifference to the overwhelming majority of Southern Irish people. In some ways, its illicit status in the North would seem to make its use in a confrontational setting all the more transgressive and by that measure, more effective. This is certainly the case in some instances—for example, amongst Republican prisoners in the H-Block protests during the late 70’s and early 80’s.

<sup>154</sup> Louis Althusser, ‘Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses’, in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001), 118.

<sup>155</sup> *Hush-a-Bye, Baby*. Dir. Margo Harkin. Perf. Emer McCourt and Michael Liebman. Derry Film and Video Workshop, 1990. Videocassette.

Neither Ciarán nor Goretti speak much Irish, though they meet in an adult education class where flirtation and innuendo dominate the language lessons. A friend of Goretti's, also in the class, refers to women Irish speakers as 'Gael-whores' instead of the rhyming '*Gaeilgeoirs*', presumably to impress upon the viewer the ironic distance with which young people participate in 'nationalist' activity in the postmodern statelet. Ciarán is walking Goretti home from Irish class when they are stopped by the soldier on the street. Harkin renders the scene as a kind of cockfight between the two males who try to win the attentions of the female onlooker.

Althusser's 'Hey, you there,' becomes in the mouth of the British soldier, "Can I take your name please?" and then 'How do you spell it?' The unlikely amiability of the soldier is such that Ciarán's annoyance with the situation comes off as unwarranted. Ciarán responds to his demands for identity thus: '*Bord Fáilte agus Sinn Féin agus AerLingus agus Bord na Móna—Cead Míle Fáilte, Tiocfaidh Ár Lá,*' enunciating the last phrase with particular vitriol. What he has replied to the interpellating soldier then is, 'Irish Tourist Board, Sinn Féin, Irish Airlines, Irish Peat Board, A Hundred Thousand Welcomes and Our Day Will Come'. The soldier answers, unexpectedly of course: '*Ni thigim, mate. Abair arís, le de thoil.*' ['I didn't get that, mate. Could you say it again, please?']

The British soldier is a 'real' Irish speaker (and thus a bizarre historical anomaly) and therefore shows up Ciarán's attempts both to derail the policing procedure and to show off in front of the girl. Ostensibly Goretti cannot follow the Irish they have exchanged, but she can sense that her man has been profoundly emasculated; she even smirks while the 'castration' is taking place. Ciarán attempts to use the Irish language as a material force, a kind of smothered violence against his interlocutor, but within the confines of the film, he is always already 'out-forced'. Even the individual soldier he confronts is more personally 'forceful'. He is better looking, more virile (he holds a standard issue assault rifle); he is charming and his Irish is better (i.e., he can speak it). The displacement of the indigenous speech act to the mouth of the agent of occupying power—who masters it, knows it better and returns it utterly neutralised—could have proven highly disturbing. However, Harkin chooses to play the scene as more reminiscent of comedic tropes of the Irishman who cannot speak his own language.<sup>156</sup> The director's sympathies are clearly with the girl who stands watching with no 'language' of her own (neither English nor Irish) and no opportunity to participate in the symbolic scene. 'Hush-a-Bye, Baby' is at least in part a comment on the appropriation of women's bodies by the Roman Catholic church—hence Goretti's failure to obtain an abortion—which is construed as parallel to, or in Harkin's eyes, worse than, the appropriations of (mostly) men's bodies by the punitive apparatus of the British state. In other words, it is through the lens of gender politics that the film is meant to be read, but readings against the grain are also possible and perhaps more compelling.

For instance, what of the fact that Ciarán must cull his 'Irish' from the linguistic ruins? His pseudo-language amounts to reified bits, fragments of logos and catchphrases. His is a second-degree borrowing – the first borrowers being the corporations, government institutions, and resistance organisations who use Irish 'phrases' toward an appearance of 'authenticity'. At this historical conjuncture, Ciarán's access to a radically obsolescing language is indeed more or less confined to TV slogans, the occasional advert, and a less than rigorous night course. His instinct to bundle together these sclerotic shards and to use them would seem to be politically salient, but his colossal failure is indexed to the figure of the *flíocha* soldier. We might read the

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<sup>156</sup> See Fidelma Farley's treatment of this topic in *This Other Eden* (Cork: Cork UP, 2001): 30-35.

person of the dashing soldier—who speaks the indigenous language better than the native—as a measure of the extent to which identity politics and related identarian commodities (Irish objects, slogans, collectables, phrases) are always-already accommodated to regimes of colonial capitalism. David Lloyd has written of ‘the apparent inevitability of the devolution of “authentic national culture” into kitsch. The commodification of certain styles and the mechanical reproduction of standardized forms of affect that have traditionally been the hallmarks of kitsch have their close counterparts in cultural nationalism’.<sup>157</sup> Though assumed to have rebellious properties and thus wielded as weapons of resistance, these identity-markers are rather neutralised by that same market which gives them their *raison d’être*, their demographic of consumers (the disaffected Irish), as well their power to materialise and circulate. In other words, they do not disrupt the workings of the market, but instead function as potential occasions for new consumption.

The ability of colonial capital to contain if not eliminate the seemingly unincorporable excess of the Irish language is further evinced by the soldier’s complete indifference to what was once a battle-cry: *Tiocfaidh ár lá*. As opposed to the furore with which Máire Nic An Bhaird was met when she was thought to have uttered the phrase, Ciarán’s interrogator does not bat an eye. The scene is instructive because it depicts the way in which identarianism haunts all such post/colonial interchanges. The seductions of ‘identity’ threaten to swallow the politically wielded indigenous speech act into a behaviour more or less consistent with, rather than anathema to, the imperatives of Anglophone capital and the state.

#### *Teacht i Méadaíocht/ Rite of Passage*<sup>158</sup>

The second text is a bilingual poem, a semi-autobiographical work that relates a formative moment in the speaker’s childhood, set against a blighted urban landscape (West Belfast) with its petrol bombs and ubiquitous foreign soldiery. The rite of the title is not the likelier (but less interesting) Catholic sacrament, but rather the boy’s first confrontation with the British troops. Daydreaming on his way to school, he is interpellated by the patrolling officer. That is, he is partly mistaken for but also inaugurated as a fledgling republican. The young poet, Gearóid Mac Lochlainn, goes on to describe this initiation into the semi-adult street life of ‘Troubles’-era Northern Ireland. As rites do, it marks a change of status from potency to actuality, from childhood to adolescence, adolescence being the demographic from which the majority of ‘Troubles’-makers will arise. The passage from a threat which is yet to take shape to a threat which is all but imminent, even *at hand*, is effectuated by the soldier’s hail. Althusser’s time of the *toujours déjà* takes on provocative dimensions here, because the young protagonist does not awaken one day a criminal having gone to sleep an innocent. But a rite is always staged at an arbitrary time in one’s development, usually at a certain age, because its meaning inheres in its ritual enactment alone and not from any correspondence with ‘reality’. We can only assume that the dawdling speaker has initiated a new dimension of threat to the soldiers on patrol in the form of his maturing person, simply by inhabiting his body and animating it (walking to school) on the tremulous streets of Belfast. What the poem captures then is the boy in the midst of assuming a social role which the presence of the soldiers prompts, permits and consolidates, and which happens in spite of his marked lack of interest in political

<sup>157</sup> David Lloyd, ‘*The Recovery of Kitsch*’, 90. He also writes, ‘Kitsch becomes, in such spheres, the congealed memory of traumas too intimate and too profound to be lived over without stylisation and attitude’. *Ibid.*, 92.

<sup>158</sup> Gearóid Mac Lochlainn, *Sruth Teangacha/ Stream of Tongues* (Indreabhán, Conamara: Cló Iar-Chonnachta, 2002).



violence. (He dreams instead of a Bohemian writer's life). In other words, the moment of his passage from unimpressive child to (proto-)terrorist does not exist. But for some reason which is not offered in the poem—probably because unknowable to the speaker or to the soldier himself—today will be the day.

Like Ciarán in 'Hush-a-Bye, Baby' the schoolboy has little Irish. He chastises himself for being underprepared for the spontaneous ritual in which he is suddenly embroiled. He thinks: '*Classic resistance technique./ If only I'd listened harder in Irish class/I could even have refused to speak/ bloody English. Next time./ This wouldn't be the last.*'<sup>159</sup> As Mac Lochlainn is himself a 'member' of the West Belfast Gaeltacht whose work thematises the disjunctive place of Irish in the Anglophone context of the post/colony, we can assume that he remedies this youthful error. And yet the poem communicates a level of resistance that more closely resembles sport than emerging political commitment. This has partly to do with the speaker's youth and partly to do with the sheer *jouissance* of performing rebelliousness. However, his rebellion is undermined by his desire for the law and the identity it will confer. In that sense such unruliness has already been accounted for—the protocols for dealing with it are already in place. (The soldier calls for backup, he becomes physically coercive, and so on). Judith Butler has written a provocative article on this desirousness for the law which makes the individual at the scene of interpellation *willing* to turn and accept the hail, a willingness which actually (necessarily) precedes the hail, and which prompts the individual to heed that hail as addressed to herself and none other.<sup>160</sup> (Althusser invokes Moses' peculiar, tautological phrase: *I am that I am.*<sup>161</sup>)

And yet the boy's desire, while understandable, is clearly perverse. The predicates attaching to him in 'Troubles' Belfast, circa the 1980's, have distinctly negative connotations in terms of his future life prospects to the extent that they doom him in advance. Among them are class: he is from 'a half-built housing estate' (l.21); religion: he is a Catholic taught by 'soutaned Brothers' (l. 4); political background: he is steeped in republican lore, spelling his name with an 'H as in H-Block' (l. 60); *de facto* delinquency: his details are logged at the military base while he is yet 'pimpled pubescent', (l.1) and so on. *He does not stand a chance.* And yet for the boy, the scene of interpellation has the pull of the carnival: the English translation of the poem alludes variously to Jackie Chan (l. 35), Harry Houdini (l.87), spaghetti westerns (l. 62), and *The Wizard of Oz* (l. 90). There is a dimension of dramatic irony in that the boy remains good-humoured throughout the scene, even when it becomes heated, such as when the soldier shouts: '—Keep your fuckin' 'ands on the wall, Paddy!/' (l. 92). In other words, the speaker cannot fully appreciate the trajectory which has just been set in the way that the audience can. Better he remain an invisible child, an innocent, we might think. Except that he was always-already ensnared in these patterns, even before he was born, and it would only be a matter of time before this latency emerged.

Irish may have the potential to derange the interpellative process, though this is clearly not the boy's desire. Rather, he is interested in prolonging the conflict in order to further indulge his 'bad subjectivity' upon the British troops. This would be, moreover, a culturally sanctioned if not overtly encouraged activity amongst the boy's support community. The problem lies in the fact that Althusser would say, in effect, that *there is no 'bad subject'*. He uses the phrase only once to refer to those individuals at the scene of interpellation who

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<sup>159</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>160</sup> Judith Butler, 'Conscience Doth Make Subjects of Us All: Althusser's Subjection', in *The Psychic Life of Power: theories in subjection* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1997): 106-131.

<sup>161</sup> Althusser, 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses', 121.

‘provoke the intervention of one of the detachments of the (repressive) State apparatus’.<sup>162</sup> That is, those who become momentarily unruly and require the bodily restraints that most people voluntarily self-impose. For Althusser, ‘bad subject’ is a kind of oxymoron: as long as one becomes a subject *full stop*, then being a ‘good one’ or a ‘bad one’ is ultimately beside the point.<sup>163</sup> A good subject (working by itself, i.e. by ideology) or a bad subject (requiring the intervention of the RSA) is effectively indistinguishable from the vantage point of successful subjectivation, i.e., social reproduction.

The pre-scripted quality of the scene and the inevitability of its future repetition, is shown in such lines as ‘*Sin an chéad uair a stop saighdiúir mé.*’<sup>164</sup> The poet’s English translation—(‘for it was my first time--/’)—has a sexual hint, and this is in keeping with the seduction inherent in the scene of interpellation. Denise Riley has used the phrase ‘dulcet interpellation.’<sup>165</sup> It seizes the boy on his way to school, arriving like a siren’s call: dulcet and impossible to resist. The poem acknowledges this desire (what Judith Butler has called the ‘passionate attachment’ to the Law, or the complicitous ‘*desire* for the Law’)<sup>166</sup>, as the desire to be recognized by the authorities in one’s given social formation. Even if the identity on offer is saturated with misgiving, it is still preferable, it would seem, to not being recognized at all.

A derogated personhood is personhood nevertheless. The eagerness to turn around and comply with the voice of authority can be explained by an anticipation of the promise of identity, which is not resisted because the *alternative is literally unfathomable* (though we approach something like this in the following text). Butler argues that the recompense of identity—being recognized within the social and symbolic order (of law and language)—is the great enticement to *assujettissement* that never fails. This goes some way toward explaining why the scene of interpellation, despite some foreboding, still has such magnetism for the boy. It is as if he has only to hear the beginning of the hail, the mere suggestion of the glottal fricative, and he has already ‘turned’. The boy uses Irish simply as a prop, a supplement to support his theatrical debut. And though Harkin and Mac Lochlainn’s texts gesture toward the use of indigenous language as a political resource, we will have to go further in order to envision a linguistic praxis.

### *The Wind that Shakes the Barley*<sup>167</sup>

Whether or not Ken Loach’s 2006 Palme d’Or winning film, *The Wind that Shakes the Barley*, is an adequately ecumenical representation of the Irish War of Independence, whether or not it overstates the coherence or legitimacy of the Left at that time, is not of our concern.<sup>168</sup> Loach’s nefarious (read Marxist)

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<sup>162</sup> Ibid., 123.

<sup>163</sup> Butler writes, ‘Here one might usefully conjecture that the reason there are so few references to “bad subjects” in Althusser is that the term tends toward the oxymoronic’. *The Psychic Life of Power*, 119.

<sup>164</sup> Mac Lochlainn, *Sruth Teangacha*, 36.

<sup>165</sup> Quoted in Jean-Jacques Lecercle and Denise Riley, *The Force of Language* (Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

<sup>166</sup> Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, 108.

<sup>167</sup> *The Wind That Shakes the Barley*. Dir. Ken Loach. Perf. Cillian Murphy and Padraic Delaney. Spirit Productions, 2006. DVD.

<sup>168</sup> The smashing of the Left in Ireland during the period surrounding independence is the major theme of Ken Loach’s *The Wind that Shakes the Barley*. Loach’s depiction of a robust but ultimately crushed Left articulates the continuing deformations and residues of a violently curtailed revolution. Loach’s suggestion that the revolution is profoundly unfinished—rather than a *fait accompli* to be justly celebrated—has drawn vigorous attacks on his ‘objectivity’. His critics wish to hold him to Ireland ‘on its own terms’, presumably that is, its pre-sanctioned narrative, which would indeed overshadow and discredit the poor, the Left, etc. The suggestion is

motives and his portrayal of the savagery of certain British troops in Ireland (namely the ‘Black and Tans’) has garnered considerable ire amongst the British media and Ireland’s revisionist historians. Early in the film, the Black and Tans demonstrate astonishing brutality when they beat the life out of the character, Mícheál, and such scenes are used against Ken Loach (who has never been a subtle film-maker) as proof of his gratuitousness and warped historical sensibility. Yet I would argue that the scene supplies us with an astute measure of the threat Mícheál introduces when he will neither produce a legible identity nor speak in English.

Mícheál is an unusual kind of malcontent. He is not interested in language rights, in masculine strutting, or in the *jouissance* of rebellion. That Mícheál has altogether different objectives is communicated effectively by Loach from the beginning, and this gravity imbues the scene with a sense of impending catastrophe. Does Loach exaggerate the dangers or the stakes in rural Ireland during this time of upheaval? Yes and no: the handheld camera careers around and adds to the sense of chaos. Fragile old women and their daughters and granddaughters mill around the farmhouse yard, scared stiff by the soldiers who materialise as if from nowhere shouting obscenities and who, quite unprovoked, point rifles at their heads. Has Loach’s combination of the panic of the vulnerable juxtaposed with the seething blood-thirst of the special-forces manipulated the audience? Perhaps, though he also captures the inescapable reality of arbitrary brutality during war. Moreover, as in the case of Máire Nic An Bhaird, spoken Irish is correctly configured as a problematic and disconcertingly opaque behaviour, a ‘disorderly conduct’, despite the fact that Nic An Bhaird did not own it as such.

How does this (linguistic) disorder differ from the more predictable disorder of (terrorist) violence? David Lloyd draws on Walter Benjamin to answer this question, writing: ‘What the state fears . . . is an alternative system of legality or rationality, rather than the unbridled and formless motion of force which is yet to be subordinated’.<sup>169</sup> Mícheál broaches a borderland *beyond* good and bad subjectivity. He overreaches his own animal ‘perseverance-in-being’—assuming a liminal condition that Badiou calls ‘disinterested interest’<sup>170</sup>—and this is sensed by the soldiers (quite rightly, I think) as inherently destabilising, hence the escalation of tension unto a final act of savage violence.

Of what does Mícheál’s ‘alternative rationality’ consist? Firstly, a note on what it is not. Seamus Deane characterises many anti-colonial nationalisms as akin to a collective declaration of ‘internal independence’. He writes, ‘As in the case of India, but also in keeping with many colonised territories, Ireland had claimed for itself a kind of internal independence predicated on a spirituality (‘National’, ‘Irish’, ‘Celtic’) that distinguished it from the oppressor British system and even, in some of its more overheated supporters, was said to distinguish

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that by merely speaking of the Left (i.e. filming their stories), Loach gives them a credibility or a legitimacy they do not deserve. For both sides of the debate, see Niall Meehan ‘Ireland’s Freedom Struggle and the Foster School of Falsification’ in *Counterpunch*, 11/12 Nov. (2006); Roy Foster ‘The Red and the Green: On Ken Loach’s pseudo-history “The Wind That Shakes the Barley”’ in *The Dublin Review*, 24 (2006); Stephen Howe ‘The Wind That Shakes the Barley: Ken Loach and Irish History’, [www.opendemocracy.net](http://www.opendemocracy.net), 15 June (2006); and Donal Ó Drisceoil’s ‘Framing the Irish Revolution: Ken Loach’s The Wind that Shakes the Barley’ *Radical History Review*, 104 (2009): 5-15.

<sup>169</sup> Lloyd, *Ireland After History*, 27.

<sup>170</sup> Badiou uses Spinoza’s phrase ‘perseverance in being’. He writes, ‘If we define interest as perseverance in being . . . then we can see that ethical consistency manifests itself as *disinterested interest*’. Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. Peter Hallward (London: Verso, 2001), p. 48-49; original emphasis.

it from the rest of the world'.<sup>171</sup> In other words, Irishness would be maintained on the *inside*, while other modern economic processes would continue unabated on the 'outside'. This independent interior would function as a (rather piteous) recompense for the continuing destruction wrought on the 'exterior' by a 'rationalising' capitalist modernity. In fact Irish identity functions as a place-marker, an alibi, for those practices that would actually provide some sort of demonstratively Irish cultural difference, i.e., distinctive material practices, alternative regimes of ownership, and so on. Interpellation in this context then can be understood as a means to introject that which it seeks to recover. As Foucault wrote of confession, (a similar form of the demand for narrative), it is not a revelation of the interior and its recesses, but rather their constitution.<sup>172</sup>

Subsequently, Mícheál makes no recourse to a spiritual interior. He does the opposite of brandish an independent Irish inside, since as Jean-Jacques Lecercle argues, 'The effect of this process of interpellation is to *create an inside*, a psyche'.<sup>173</sup> The 'Irishness' demonstrated by Mícheál is not an ethnic inner realm but a material practice he utilises because it has the power to disrupt other (oppressive) material practices. To put it another way, Mícheál, does not share the same illogical enthusiasm for the law as, for example, the boy-speaker in the previous text. Neither does he reject the *specific* identity which has been imposed upon him by colonialism (seditious, backward, 'mick bastard', and so on) in favour of another, because neither is it the case that he has a 'truer' identity hidden inside that colonialism has made recessive. It is the very idea of an interior identity more 'real' than external practices—i.e., of land tenure, communal holdings, affective networks and obligations, labour, play, and so on—that is itself the corrupt idea. It is as a series of acts *against* this idea that Mícheál's behaviour must be read.

The scene opens as the quasi-mercenary Black and Tans arrive at the farmhouse where a group of young men has just returned from playing a hurling match. As Gaelic games were banned at the time<sup>174</sup>—they were thought to signify nationalist sympathies—the soldiers descend upon the site to reassert control:

CAPTAIN: (shouting) How many times have you bastards, you mick bastards, been told?  
Defense of the Realm Act! All public meetings are banned and that includes your culchie little games. Do you understand?

When the captain orders his men to 'take the details', it has little to do with information gathering. Rather as Althusser implies, there is a twofold function to the structure of the hail: firstly it requires the yes, I recognise my 'self' as the one being addressed, and secondly it requires the yes, I accept the terms by which I am hailed and the authority of the one who so addresses me. Or as Althusser puts it, it is a solicitation of assent along the lines of: 'it really is true that it is so and not otherwise'.<sup>175</sup>

<sup>171</sup> Seamus Deane, 'Dumbness and Eloquence: A Note on English as We Write It in Ireland' *Ireland and Postcolonial Theory*, eds. Clare Carroll and Patricia King (Cork: Cork UP, 2003), 111.

<sup>172</sup> See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, trans. Robert Hurley (London: Penguin Books, 1998).

<sup>173</sup> Jean-Jacques Lecercle, *Interpretation as Pragmatics* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999); emphasis mine.

<sup>174</sup> 'In 1918 the British Authorities informed Luke O'Toole [General Secretary of the GAA] that no hurling or football games would be allowed unless a permit was obtained from Dublin Castle'. [www.gaa.ie/about-the-gaa/gaa-history](http://www.gaa.ie/about-the-gaa/gaa-history). Web. 31/01/2011.

<sup>175</sup> Althusser, 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses', 123.

COMMANDER: I want names. I want addresses. I want an occupation.

SOLDIER: (to first boy) Name!

FIRST BOY: Connor O'Sullivan.

COMMANDER: Louder!

FIRST BOY: Connor O' Sullivan . . . Ballingeary . . . Ironmonger.

Loach's camera pans the line of 'suspects', i.e., insurgent sympathisers, actual volunteers, apolitical farmhands; it is almost beside the point. They stand arranged in front of the house in a kind of identity parade:

SOLDIER: (to second boy) Name!

SECOND BOY: Chris Riley.

COMMANDER: Louder!

SECOND BOY: Chris Riley. . . Rives Estate, by the crossroads . . . Farm Labourer.

COMMANDER: More like a prick. . . . Don't grin at me, you bastard.

The third young man responds to their questions, but he will only do so in Irish:

SOLDIER: (to third boy) Name!

THIRD BOY: *Mícheál Ó Súilleabháin*.

The commander is quick to intervene. The fourth boy, Damien, intervenes as well:

COMMANDER: What's that shite?! He doesn't want riddles. He wants your name. In English. Tell him!

FOURTH BOY: (to *Mícheál*) Tell him!

COMMANDER: (to Damien) Shut the fuck up!

THIRD BOY: (in Irish) *Is Gaeilge m'ainm. Mícheál Ó Súilleabháin fós é.*

COMMANDER: (to *Mícheál*) Bit of a comic, are we, boy? Do you see me laughing?

A determinate refusal would more closely resemble a defiant muteness, an obscene gesture or perhaps an attempt at flight. *Mícheál* does not, strictly speaking, refuse. By speaking Irish, (already a fading indigenous language by 1920), he calls forth a series of problems that from the perspective of colonial-capital would be better left consigned to the grave.<sup>176</sup> To pronounce words in a near-dead language—moreover, to do so in

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<sup>176</sup> By this time, the language would have had an infusion of nationalist pride due to the activities of the Gaelic League (est. 1893) and auxiliary groups, but it would still have been a languishing tongue. For the most part, Irish in the North is preoccupied with its status of being non-British, which makes it wholly dependent, of course, on the 'British' to maintain its integrity as a concept (that is, expressive of 'Irishness'). This would also be the case in the run-up to, and in the early days of, independence in the South. Yet as Tony Crowley argues, 'In the same way that the Gaelic League numbered hundreds of thousands in its membership rolls, but only a very small number of students who actually became fluent in the language, likewise the efforts of the State in halting the decline of Irish have failed dismally. Irish Independence did not bring a revival of Gaelic; if anything, it appears to have hastened its decay'. *The Politics of Language in Ireland 1366-1922: A Sourcebook* (London: Routledge, 2000), 6.

conditions of extreme infelicity—creates uncanny reverberations, in the sense that all ‘hauntings’ do. As restless ghosts more often than not bear witness to the unjustness of their own deaths, so too does spoken Irish announce the violence inherent to its own effacement.

‘Bit of a comic, are we, boy?’, the commander says. His momentary miscalculation in the heat of the moment—*he is trying to be funny*—betrays the slippage, however slight, in the captain’s mastery over the course of events. Mícheál’s unexpected form of non-complicity has caused them all to lurch beyond the usual script. The perception of this flicker of unexpected fragility in the law prompts the commander to an over-compensatory display, a reconsolidation of his own power. He shouts, ‘Well laugh at this. Strip off, the lot of you’.

All of them immediately fumble with their clothes except Mícheál. The other boys peel off their layers and braces, exposing their undershirts, while Mícheál stands perfectly still. Damien, perhaps the older of the two, tells Mícheál to do it, to deliver his name, his identarian coordinates, into English. (In effect, he advises him to right the (linguistic) wrong and take off his clothes as a gesture of submission, otherwise he will surely die). Mícheál is impassive and what takes place next forms the crux of the scene. The others attempt to rescue Mícheál from the impending wrath of the soldiers by trying to answer the hail for him: ‘He lives with me. His name is Michael O’Sullivan’. But this is a strategy bound to fail. *Only Mícheál* himself can do it; only he can answer the hail. The efforts to ventriloquize him, his ‘self,’ his ‘I am that I am’ by the people who care for him indeed proves futile. Still, they feverishly repeat: ‘Michael O’Sullivan’. ‘He’s seventeen years of age’. ‘He’s not involved in anything’. They are verbose, unrestrained, even extravagant in their use of English, as if to make up for the aberrance of Mícheál’s Irish. They are all ‘translating’ for him; translating *him* to the commander whose rage is palpable. The translations of him, of his Irish, come as gestures of spontaneous affection and protection from those who suspect what is coming. They (and surely Mícheál himself) have surmised the consequences of this act. Indeed the speed and reliability with which a transition is sparked from what was an ideological scenario (‘working all by itself’) to one working by pure force is remarkable. The tenor of the scene changes little but its operating procedure—the shift from implicit to overt violence—is almost instantly transmuted. As the rituals of ideology become insufficient, so does the commander invoke outright coercion. Mícheál is dragged into the shelter where he will be beaten to death, and the chorus of shouts is repetitive and even incantatory, issued forth as (verbal) talismanic protections that do Mícheál no good. Damien cups his hands so that his voice will carry: ‘He’s not involved in anything. Michael O’Sullivan is his name. He’s not involved in anything. Seventeen years of age. Micheal O’Sullivan. Seventeen years of age’.

The critical charge against Loach is that he cheaply overstates the nastiness of the Black and Tans by suggesting they would kill a boy for refusing to speak in English. My contention is that on the contrary, in some very real sense the response is *befitting of the threat*—even Damien and the other boys are ‘threatened’ by Mícheál’s behaviour. While their protectiveness toward him is real, it is not entirely selfless, because Mícheál implicitly invites them to do the same thing. His behaviour throws up an instant contrast to their own ‘rational’ willingness to comply. Indeed the panic surrounding Mícheál’s acts, and the perceived need for excessive force, has less to do with what he individually *does* than the fact that those acts can easily be *generalised*. What if all the boys present suddenly became opaque in this way and unpredictable? What if they were to turn their potency into an actuality? Walter Benjamin had a special name for this radical potential of the relatively powerless—the

farm labourers, ironmongers, and so forth—a potential which requires only a spark to set off the conflagration, of which they are, *and always had been*, resolutely capable. He called it our ‘weak Messianic power’.

The law cannot proceed without subjects. As Mícheál moves to cancel himself-as-subject, it causes a flash of violability, of destructibility, in the previously inviolable, indestructible, law. The scene suggests that Mícheál transgresses in a way that is outside the known bounds, and that this makes the transgression more egregious and more threatening than his membership in any band of militants. By answering only in Irish, Mícheál in effect calls into question the legitimacy of the social order whose agent has hailed him, pointing out the spuriousness of its presence, confronting power with ‘the situation of its enunciation’.<sup>177</sup> By highlighting the situated nature of this particular enunciation of power, he points out its profound contingency and in its contingency, exposes its pretence to universality. Moreover, Mícheál embodies the notion that the violence to which they are being subjected is a result of (the English) language working a kind of social magic.<sup>178</sup> It is only, his acts imply, an elaborate *trick of language which has thus transformed thuggery into Law*.

His spoken Irish is not merely a negative behaviour. Its simple enunciation provokes a *subjunctive space*, subjunctive because it bears witness not to what *is* but rather what might have been, what theoretically might still be. What is only implicit in the previous texts and what becomes explicit through the person of Mícheál, is an invocation of counter-order. Mícheál’s counter-interpellation gestures toward, and metonymically comprises and belongs to, this counter-order. In speaking to the agents of British law *in Irish* Mícheál actually enacts the counter-order. He demonstrates that this counter-order needs only to be performed in order to bring it about and thereby cause the dominant order to falter. (Similarly, Benjamin writes of a ‘past charged with the time of the now [*Jetztzeit*]’ with which we may ‘make the continuum of history explode’.<sup>179</sup>) Temporal dislocation is made actual when Mícheál conjures a subjunctive space in which he and others like him *would not have recognised* the authority of English—not the English language, nor English common law, nor English agents of the State, and so on.

As Mícheál introduces a possibility that did not exist before, (Ireland as never having been colonised), he retroactively inserts it as such. Žižek explains this ‘circle of changing the past’ with reference to Henri Bergson’s thought. He writes ‘Of course one cannot change the past reality/actuality, but what one can change is the virtual dimension of the past—when something radically New emerges it retroactively creates its own possibility, its own causes or conditions. A potentiality can be inserted into (or withdrawn from) past reality’.<sup>180</sup> For a split second and in a single (but potentially multiplicitous) incarnation, the counter-order *is*. Radically, unstoppably, it is. To be ‘blasted out of the continuum of history’ is described by Žižek in terms of the “*futur antérieur*.” [in which] overtaking oneself vis-a-vis the future, one acts now as if the future one wanted to bring about were already here’.<sup>181</sup> This is precisely what Mícheál does. Perhaps the real tragedy is the fact that the others do not follow him as they might have. Benjamin lamented just such failures to act—those revolutionary possibilities which we have seized fumblingly, ineptly, or more so not at all. Loach characterises these historical

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<sup>177</sup> Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 2008), 26.

<sup>178</sup> Pierre Bourdieu writes ‘Those who, like Max Weber, have set the magical or charismatic law of the collective oath or the ordeal in opposition to a rational law based on calculability and predictability, forget that the most rigorously rationalised law is never anything more than an act of social magic which works’.

*Language and Symbolic Power*, 42.

<sup>179</sup> Walter Benjamin, ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’ *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 253.

<sup>180</sup> Žižek, *Living in the End Times* (London: Verso, 2010), 28.

<sup>181</sup> Žižek, *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce* (London and New York: Verso, 2009), 151.

oscillations, charts these openings and subsequent closings of possibility as they arise and pass away, arise and pass away.

The narrative function of the scene to the film as a whole is to trigger Damien into joining the fight for independence. But in order to do this, Damien must actually turn against (Mícheál's invocation of) 'weak Messianic power' and replace it with the more identifiable recourse to revenge. That is, he will join the struggle in order to avenge his friend's grisly death—the principles of an abstract nationalism made 'personal'. When the others say to him, *What about Mícheál?*, he responds matter of factly: 'Mícheál died because he refused to give his name in English. Not much of a martyr, is it?' This discursive closure apparently had to be performed; it is supplement to the physical one dispatched with Mícheál's death. In the same way that Damien nominated him to the 'Black and Tans' ('His name is Micheal O'Sullivan; he's seventeen years of age'), so does he impose on Mícheál *post-mortem* a narrative to replace the void where it should go. But it is decidedly *not* as a martyr, because it would be unthinkable that others should emulate him or aspire to repeat his actions. Damien absolves them all of the anxiety and burden of doing so, but so too has he foresworn the potential of which Benjamin so eloquently spoke.

Žižek writes, 'Once a legal order is installed, its contingent origins are erased. Once it *is* here, it was *always already* here, every story about its origins is now a myth, just like Swift's story of the origins of language in *Gulliver's Travels*: the result is already presupposed'.<sup>182</sup> The beauty of the Irish language, and many an indigenous language in an Anglophone (Francophone, Lusophone, etc.) post-colony, is that it materially belies this notion of the state as springing from a misty eternality and instead marks it with a bloody date. Spoken Irish is a jagged, disjunctive *refutation* of this myth. Spoken Irish in unauthorised contexts recalls the fact that *there were other life-worlds operating* in the not so distant past, other successful ways of relating to property and people that had very little, if anything, to do with contemporary market relations. The impetus to speak it can thus remember and re-constitute those other social formations, while still maintaining the critical distance required to approach and remedy their inadequacies constructively.

The first thing to do is to break with what Celia Britton has called the 'language-identity equation'.<sup>183</sup> Thinking of the language as a means to bolster identity is the opposite of what I have proposed. Indigenous language needs to be used almost as a form of anti-identity, especially inasmuch as 'identity' has provided an ideological bulwark *against* radical change. This is ultimately the difference between the first texts (the 'bad subjects') and what Mícheál enacts in the final text, an anti-identarian, 'subjective destitution'. Only Mícheál has produced the kind of alterity that ungrounds the soldiers and their edifice of unlimited authority; it unmakes them if only for an instant. Unlike land and labour power, which were turned to the exigencies of colonial capital, the Irish language was better eradicated and replaced by English, because it could not be made over as a functional resource (except perhaps as a pacifying identity-marker). This means not that it has remained in some kind of pristine state—that it is 'pure'—but rather that it is immediately discordant with contemporary relations of production. In Loach's scene, it is the persistence of Irish through the person of Mícheál which wrenches all of the actors (historical, literal) out of the forward march of (homogenous, empty) time and affords a Benjaminian reclamation of the past, in the interests of a renewed and 'redeemed' futurity.

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<sup>182</sup> Žižek, *Living in the End Times*, 29.

<sup>183</sup> Celia Britton, *Edouard Glissant and postcolonial theory: strategies of language and resistance* (Charlottesville, VA ; London: University Press of Virginia, 1999), 47.



### 3. Toward a Semiotics of Capital: on Brian Friel's *Translations*

--'An old linguist's joke: What is a language? A dialect with an army'.<sup>184</sup>

#### i.

No pre-capitalist social formation ever existed in which clusters of agents abided with nothing at their disposal except for their own labour power. Just as no pre-capitalist social formation had managed to structure itself upon agglomerations of wealth that were, so to speak, self-augmenting. Yet 'self-augmenting' wealth requires aggregates of labourers with nothing but their labour power, and because they do not exist, they will have to be created. How is it possible to translate relational sites of land, community and language into the autonomous, embodied occasions of labour power, who come 'voluntarily' before the market to sell this labour power? The short answer is to expropriate the land, dismantle the community, and suppress the language—so that there will be no other choice. Marx writes of 'those moments when great masses of men are suddenly and forcibly torn from their means of subsistence, and hurled onto the labour-market as free, unprotected and rightless proletarians. The expropriation of the agricultural producer, of the peasant, from the soil is the basis of the whole process'.<sup>185</sup> We see the same process from Ireland to Kenya, from South Asia to the Caribbean islands and so on. Only by effacing the violence that went into their installation can such social relations proceed as if 'fair', 'equal' and even mutually beneficial.

Capital employs the algorithm of exchange value in order to 'translate' the world. It succeeds in subsuming everything under this rubric by a production process that defines all objects in the social field in terms of socially necessary labour-time. (Marx describes how Aristotle could not see labour-time as the means by which to compare unlike things, because different types of labour had not yet become 'homogenous' in his time, and thus the problem of value remained a mystery).<sup>186</sup> At the same time, labour-power itself is one commodity among others. What distinguishes labour—and so makes it the vehicle for rendering all goods commensurate—is the fact that its use value, upon consumption, occasions new exchange values. Such occasions require in turn a class that has the means of production at its disposal and so is in a position to realize those new exchange values, and so extract surplus value from the process as a whole.

And this process, though operating under highly specific constraints, knows no end. In that sense, capital as code begins to show itself as 'structured like a language', since language too is confined to specific conventions (*langue*) though it is, technically speaking, infinitely generative (*parole*). Deleuze and Guattari recall how Marx's formula 'M-C-M' similarly 'points to the position of a relation without limitation'. When introduced into places where it does not exist (i.e., pre-capitalist social formations) it has the devastating effects of destroying 'the very basis of codes': 'The introduction of money as an equivalent . . . makes it possible to

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<sup>184</sup> paraphrase of Jean-Jacques Lecercle in *A Marxist Philosophy of Language* (London : Haymarket Books, 2009).

<sup>185</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital Vol. I*, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1990), 876.

<sup>186</sup> Marx writes, 'Greek society was founded on the labour of slaves, hence had as its natural basis the inequality of men and of their labour-powers. The secret of the expression of value, namely the equality and equivalence of all kinds of labour because and in so far as they are human labour in general, could not be deciphered until the concept of human equality had already acquired the permanence of a fixed popular opinion. This however becomes possible only in a society where the commodity-form is the universal form of the product of labour, hence the dominant social relation is the relation between men as possessors of commodities'. Marx, *Capital*, 152.

begin and end with money, [and] therefore never to end at all'.<sup>187</sup> The tension between use value and exchange value—like signs in a signifying chain—is due to its appearance as a differential relation, though neither exists prior to or apart from this (differential) relation itself. Labour-power as a commodity that discharges itself upon its consumption, but which generates new exchange values and thus new surplus values, is that which drives this machinery of the 'never-ending', this frenzied expanse of the code that destroys all other codes.

In capital's outward trajectories, its criss-crossing of the globe, it appears to be 'universal' but this is simply because it never stops proliferating its code. In fact it points to a highly particular set of circumstances. The production of new exchange values and the universality of the commodity form can only take root in a historically specific context (which it then duplicates across the rest of the world). Above all it requires the presence of a class so stripped of resources that it has no means of maintenance beyond selling its labour-power. Capital succeeds in translating the world only when it makes this contingent context appear natural, universal—and inevitable. And this it can do only when it manages to erase the legacy of violence that first engineered this context. As Marx implies, violence appears to dissipate in the staging of contractual exchange, the meeting of 'equals', who are the capitalist with wages to offer and the labourer with his labour power to sell.

In the peripheries, there must literally be no other way to survive. *Clachans*, or clans or ethnic groups, etc., cannot be allowed to maintain a culture based upon subsistence agriculture, because this dilutes the need for wages and thus considerably shrinks the available labour pool. This tension is apparent in David Lloyd's description of the dismantling of rundale, a land-tenure system of communal holdings predominant in pre-Famine Ireland: 'The very vehemence of the desire to extirpate the *clachan* as the basis of "Irish contentment" indicates the extent to which it was recognised, even by its antagonists, as an all too viable and insistently contemporaneous alternative to capitalist social relations that were not yet themselves securely established'.<sup>188</sup> If there were alternatives, the dismal and violent social relations of capital would likely be abandoned en masse, or as Deleuze and Guattari suggest, they would have been avoided in the first place. It is not that capitalist relations are unknown, they argue, outside their historical consolidation in the 'West'. Rather they comprise the dark undercurrent, the corrosive potential—"the negative"—of all social formations,<sup>189</sup> which as such signal utter annihilation: 'In a sense, capitalism has haunted all forms of society, but it haunts them as their terrifying nightmare. . . . It cannot be said that previous formations did not foresee this Thing . . . that at all costs had to be prevented from rising'.<sup>190</sup>

Capital feels varied and multiplicitous because it never ends—is everywhere, extends to all corners of the globe—but in fact it drastically narrows the universe it overcodes to a basic equilibrating matrix ( $A=A$ ). Brian Friel shows this narrowing of the life-world into the equilibrating function of colonial-capital in his popular play, *Translations*, but it is an unwitting display, I will argue. That is, for Friel equilibration—i.e., translation—is as eternal as it is ultimately neutral. His characters, like the agents on the market who assume contractual obligations, come to each other at the point where 'human equality has already acquired the fixity of a popular prejudice' (Marx), and antagonism is subsumed beneath the guise of mutual need.

<sup>187</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus* (London: Continuum Books, 2004), 270.

<sup>188</sup> David Lloyd, *Irish Times: Temporalities of Modernity* (Dublin: Field Day in association with the Keough-Naughton Institute at the University of Notre Dame, 2008), 48.

<sup>189</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 168; original emphasis.

<sup>190</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 154, 168.

As Pierre Bourdieu reminds us, even the most ‘rigorously rationalised law is never anything more than an act of social magic which works’.<sup>191</sup> What social magic is this, what elaborate conjuring trick, that adds a veneer not just of legitimacy, but more so *inevitability* to what is highly contrived, historically peculiar, and almost inconceivably violent? How does capital create aggregations of atomistic subjects who have nothing except their labour power and make it appear as if they had always been that way, as if they had emerged spontaneously in such a form? With what (linguistic) algorithm does it make its own violent translations seem benign and even desirable? Since not only do alternatives to the logic of capital cease to be liveable (no one can live without some species or configuration of wage-earning) but so do concepts of alternatives become almost impossible to articulate.

Considering that language precedes me, that I am born into and ever immersed within it, and that it founds the parameters of my reality, it is reasonable to concur with Wittgenstein that ‘*the limits of my language mean the limits of my world*’.<sup>192</sup> Hence language can never be of secondary or purely instrumental concern, because it is what the human animal *consists of*—not simply what it employs to certain ends. ‘The human animal is what it is because it literally constructed itself around language . . . .Not only are we human animals to the extent that we are linguistic animals; not only, that is, is the linguisticity of our being (the fact that the peculiarity of man is to talk) what differentiates us from non-human animals: “*the environment of the human animal is language itself*; the human animal is adapted to language, is made *for and by* language”’.<sup>193</sup> In its collusion with the logic of the sign, capital itself attempts to become the environment of the human animal and to render anything else as unsignifiable, beyond signification.

Once we understand how the logic of the sign informs the structure of colonial-capital, we will see more clearly how the capitalist mode of production functions as an inscribing, translating, equilibrating, overcoding machine—that is, as itself, a language. Hence Guattari’s concise account: ‘Capital is not an abstract category: it is a *semiotic operator* at the service of specific social formations’.<sup>194</sup> Capital is obliged to translate and absorb that which eludes its logic, that which is [not yet] commensurable with its exigencies.<sup>195</sup> But it is not a respectful or sensitive enterprise, it is an enterprise of ‘foreclosure’ and ‘abolition’.

Capital arcs back upon itself, and through its hijacking of language encodes this process in its own terms such that it cannot help but appear natural, unavoidable, inevitable. Non-capitalism can appear as either

<sup>191</sup> Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, ed. John B. Thompson, trans. Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson (Cambridge, Mass: Polity Press, 1991), 42.

<sup>192</sup> Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. C. K. Ogden (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2005), 149; original emphasis.

<sup>193</sup> Ciamatti 2000b quoted in Christian Marazzi, *Capital and Language: From the New Economy to the War Economy*, trans. Gregory Conti (London: Semiotext(e) distributed by MIT Press, 2008), 29-30. Marazzi continues, ‘In this theory of language, there is no distinction whatsoever between intention and instrument: “This is an untenable distinction because, in the evolutionary history of language, according to which language began, because, first, there was a “desire” for language, simply does not exist. There is instead *circularity* between intention and language (“in this case it is, if anything, the instrument—language—that has moulded its user.”) Ciamatti quoted in Marazzi, 30.

<sup>194</sup> Félix Guattari, ‘Capital as the Integral of Power Formations’, in *Soft Subversions: Texts and Interviews 1977-1985*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer, trans. Chet Wiener and Emily Wittman (London: Semiotext(e) in association with MIT Press, 2009), 244. Guattari elaborates by saying, ‘All of [Capital’s] “mystery” lies in the fact that it is thus able to connect, within the same general system of equivalency, entities which at first sight seem radically heterogeneous. . . . The function [of capital] is always ultimately. . . . to connect heterogeneous domains and asymmetrical potencies and powers’. Guattari, ‘Capitalist Systems, Structures, and Processes’ in *Soft Subversions*, 268.

<sup>195</sup> Guattari, ‘Capitalist Systems’, 268.

wretched and miserable, in dire need of the improvements of modernity, or it can appear as already harbouring the tendencies and logics of capitalism in germ. In effect, we can conceptualise either ugliness or basic similitude. Both of these responses are a projection of capital itself. They both express the vantage point of capital awaiting its own actualisation. Both suggest that colonial-capitalist modernity is required to overcome misery and to realise those desires that pre-exist and anticipate its coming. Reflection on the spread of capital from the ‘centre’ to the ‘peripheries’ is necessarily *post festum*, ‘after the feast,’ of plunder and of primitive accumulation. ‘Reflection,’ Marx writes, ‘begins *post festum*, and therefore with the results of the process of development ready to hand’.<sup>196</sup>

This chapter is concerned with this power of capital to fix its own horizon as the horizon of ‘reality’ itself (and thus to either naturalise its violent genesis as accidental rather than essential, or better still, through its seizure of the linguistic field—to make its violence unpronounceable, inarticulable, and unavailable to memory). Thus when violence erupts, it appears, for example in Friel’s play, as peripheral, disconnected, and always off-stage. The incursion of the British army at the play’s end is not understood as *related to* the over-coding taking place in the hedge-school room—the translation—but as its unfortunate, unforeseen opposite. In the first section of this chapter, I analyse the specifically linguistic aspects of capital’s movement of overwriting, a fundamental dimension of colonialism that has been neglected in post/colonial studies, but which has been noted elsewhere. For instance, Guattari uses the words ‘translatability’, ‘syntax’, ‘code’, and ‘semiotics’ all in regard to capitalism and speaks of ‘capitalist modes of writing’ and the ‘*semiotic machine of capitalism*’.<sup>197</sup> Baudrillard also acknowledges the striking homologies between the workings of capital and the workings of language in his trilogy on the (metaphysical) confluence of political economy and semio-linguistics. He writes,

It is because *the structure of the sign is at the very heart of the commodity form* that the commodity can take on, immediately, the effect of signification—not epiphenomenally, in excess of itself, as ‘message’ or connotation—but because its very form establishes it as a total *medium*, as a *system of communication* administering all social exchange. Like the sign-form, the commodity is a *code* managing the exchange of values. It makes little difference whether the contents of material production or the immaterial contents of significations are involved; it is the code that is determinant: the rules of the interplay of signifiers and exchange value.<sup>198</sup>

I also look at the presuppositions about the neutrality of translation in the Friel play, with the aim of demonstrating that violence is not negated by language but is, in the context of colonial translation, its most effective conduit.

## ii.

Marx himself wrote on the substitutability of values in ways that Saussure would later use to speak about the sign.<sup>199</sup> On the linguistic features of capital, Marx expounded at some length in the first volume of

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<sup>196</sup> Marx, *Capital*, 168.

<sup>197</sup> Guattari, ‘Capitalist Systems’, 265; original emphasis.

<sup>198</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *For a critique of the political economy of the sign*, trans. Charles Levin (St. Louis, MO: Telos Press, 1981), 146; original emphasis.

<sup>199</sup> Apparently Saussure was influenced by the equilibrium-theory economist, Vilfredo Pareto, in his development of a differential system, that is, ‘an economy of difference whose elements take their value from their differential relations within a structure constituted by those relations rather than by any objective dynamic’.

*Capital*. Elaborated in remarkably proto-semiotic terms, he likens the commodity form to a chain of signifiers endlessly circulating by way of their total substitutability. Within the development of the capitalist mode of production, the ascension to the money form allows all commodities to become not merely exchangeable with other commodities in localised terms, but to achieve universal exchangeability with every other commodity in the chain, indeed with every possible commodity in every possible chain.<sup>200</sup> Marx speaks of ‘an endless series of equations’ which becomes a ‘socially given fact in the shape of the prices of the commodities’.<sup>201</sup> He goes on to say: ‘Price is the money-name of the labour objectified in a commodity. Hence the expression of the equivalence of a commodity with the quantity of money whose name is that commodity’s price is a tautology’.<sup>202</sup>

Most linguists prior to Saussure would have supposed a correspondence between the ‘essence’ of an object and its appellation—or between the price of a commodity and its value, for that matter—a ‘suitability’ between referent and signifier, a natural connection because one ‘expresses’ the other. Saussure writes, ‘For some people a language, reduced to its essentials, is a nomenclature: a list of terms corresponding to a list of things. This conception is open to a number of objections. It assumes that ideas already exist independently of words. . . . Furthermore, it leads one to assume that the link between a name and a thing is something quite unproblematic, which is far from being the case’.<sup>203</sup> This is analogous to Marx suggesting that the bourgeois economists assumed value was an *a priori* category that simply found itself actualised in various commodities and the prices they commanded, rather than that the concept of value itself was the effect (and not the cause) of a social system. Similarly, Saussure contends that meaning is not pre-formed, ‘out there’ or dwelling in objects, awaiting the appropriate designation that language exists in order to provide. Rather Saussure’s major contribution is in showing how ‘meaning’ is an effect of a langue, emerging through the relationality of signs and not prior to them. The meaning of a sign resides in the difference between itself and all the other signs in a system that it is not. Derrida remarks on the Saussurean thesis of ‘difference as the source of linguistic value’ by affirming: ‘By definition, difference is never in itself a sensible plentitude’.<sup>204</sup> Value is highly context specific, it exists at the intersection of social relations, and hence is never intrinsic to an object itself. Only when the object is converted into an exchange value—and thus commensurable with all the other commodities in circulation—does its value coalesce.

Again Marx’s description is resonant. He writes, ‘The bodily form of the commodity becomes its value form. But, mark well, that this *quid pro quo* exists in the case of any commodity B, only when some other commodity A enters into a value relation with it, and then only within the limits of this relation. Since no commodity can stand in the relation of equivalent to itself, and thus turn its own bodily shape into the expression of its own value, every commodity is compelled to choose some other commodity for its

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Joshua Clover, ‘Value | Theory | Crisis’, *PMLA*, Vol. 127, No. 1 (January 2012), 109. Relative value and its associated forms are very much present in Marx’s *Capital* as well.

<sup>200</sup> Baudrillard writes, ‘The entire strategy of the system lies in this hyperreality of floating values [. . .]. Value rules according to an ungraspable order: the generation of models, the indefinite chaining of simulation’. *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, trans. Iain Hamilton Grant (London: Sage 1993), 122.

<sup>201</sup> Marx, *Capital*, 189.

<sup>202</sup> *Ibid.*, 196.

<sup>203</sup> Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, ed. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye in collaboration with Albert Riedlinger, trans. Roy Harris (London: Duckworth, 1983), 65.

<sup>204</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 53.

equivalent'.<sup>205</sup> Price does not name the intrinsic value of a commodity any more than a sign reflects an intrinsic meaning of a referent.

In fact an object which is not circulating in the chain, which is unable to circulate for whatever reason—is defective, for example—is quite literally without value: value-less. When Friel opens his play, he surveys the disused farm implements, all of which are objects out of circulation ('Around the room are broken and forgotten implements: a cart-wheel, some lobster-pots, farming tools, a battle of hay, a churn, etc'). The characters who inhabit the disused barn, either as makeshift hedge school or place of residence, would also appear to be 'defective' or broken. None of them 'circulates' on the market either, and it is difficult not to read this brokenness (Sarah is mute, Manus is lame, Jimmy Jack is practically autistic, Hugh is never sober, and so on) as already cast by a pall of worthlessness. Furthermore, Friel is not suggesting that there is some alternative value-structure at play which exists or could exist outside the logic of capital's translations or even that it should exist. The most famous lines of *Translations* readily dispense with this idea and it is, after all, a play about equilibrations. On the 'failure' of the rural Irish-speaker to adjust to modernity—to become viable on the market—Hugh says 'It can happen that a civilisation can be imprisoned in a linguistic contour which no longer matches the landscape of . . . fact'.<sup>206</sup> It would seem the saturation of the linguistic field by the logic of equivalence and exchange has already been completed.

*Parole* cannot meaningfully signify except within the social conventions of *langue* and neither can a commodity actualise its 'value' except through the prior institution of a general exchangeability (i.e., a capitalist mode of production). A value is calculated relative to all the other commodities in the chain of exchanges which it is not, in the same way that a sign derives 'meaning' only differentially or in a negative relation to all the other signs in the language: 'The number of such possible expressions [of value] is limited only by the number of the different kinds of commodities distinct from it. The isolated expression of A's value is thus transformed into the indefinitely expandable series of different simple expressions of that value'.<sup>207</sup> The homology between economic value and linguistic value is striking; both issue from the diacritical relations that obtain between a set of free-floating terms: 'Language is a system of interdependent terms in which the value of each term results solely from the simultaneous presence of the others'.<sup>208</sup> Suitably enough, Saussure himself uses the term 'value' interchangeably with 'meaning'. Just as Saussure argues that there is no preformed meaning residing in a sign which the word-name gleans and expresses but only a relational value, ('Instead of pre-existing ideas then, we find . . . *values* emanating from the system')<sup>209</sup> so Marx writes, 'The commodity never has this form [of exchange-value] when looked at in isolation, but only when it is in a value-relation or an exchange relation with a second commodity of a different kind'.<sup>210</sup>

Marx described the ways in which the suffusion of the social field by this logic of general equivalence was such that objects came to appear as if they naturally expressed an intrinsic value that political economists merely gauged and 'priced' accordingly. Similarly linguists once assumed that meaning was the revelation of an inner content, already dwelling in a referent, requiring a 'suitable' name that would mark and do justice to this meaning. On this rather mystical, inherent comparability of one commodity (or sign) to another, Žižek writes,

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<sup>205</sup> Marx, *Capital*, 148.

<sup>206</sup> Brian Friel, *Translations* (London: Faber, 1981), 43.

<sup>207</sup> Marx, *Capital*, 154.

<sup>208</sup> Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, 85.

<sup>209</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>210</sup> Marx, *Capital*, 152.

‘A seems to relate to B as if, for B, to be an equivalent of A would not be a “reflexive determination” (Marx) of A—that is as if B would *already in itself* be the equivalent of A; the property of ‘being-an-equivalent’ appears to belong to it even outside its relation to A’.<sup>211</sup>

‘Being-an-equivalent’ recalls Jean Laplanche’s ‘to-be-translated’.<sup>212</sup> Friel’s play opens upon the to-be-translated that is Ireland. It is as if the Irish and their place-names had always-already anticipated the being-an-equivalent of their English replacements. It is as if they had been waiting all along for capital to come and actualise their (otherwise inexpressible?) value. But this is of course not what happens.

The activity of translation projects an illusion of *two* languages (a target language and a matrix language) vacillating and negotiating on relatively equal footing (much of Friel’s play is given over to such scenes of mutual vacillating and negotiating). Yet in the context of the cultural translations of colonial capitalism, there is only one language engaged in the process of augmenting itself and enlarging its remit. As I have pointed out elsewhere in this dissertation, the English language is only *accidentally* coextensive with the code; it is not the code itself, though in this conjuncture, neither is it always or even often distinguishable from it. The colonial dream of absolute commutability comes to bear in Friel’s play, where even the representation of the Irish language has to be done in English and even the most ‘un-worldly’ persons are autonomous subjects in germ. Lines from the inhabitants of Ballybeg, such as ‘You’ll learn to decode us yet’ suggest the already given commensurability that the act of translation will express or activate.

Quine has made the pertinent argument that an impression may be produced during translation in which the target language appears to be somehow more capacious, more subtle, *better* than the matrix language. That Irish is being translated *into* English, instead of vice versa, suggests a greater depth to English than Irish can apparently attain. But this is an illusion. As Quine reiterates, the target language does not have ‘a wider universe’. He writes, ‘One is tempted, as I said a little while back, to suppose that it [does]; *but one is then wrong*’.<sup>213</sup> Yet the illusion of a wider universe in the target language casts a corresponding smallness on the matrix language. This sense of diminution in the home language (Irish) and the semblance of universality brought on by the rapid multiplication of the code (Anglophone colonial-capital) can only work to reinforce repressive power relations.

Quine famously asserts the (im-) possibility of ‘radical translation’. He constructs a thought-experiment, a scene in which a ‘native’ and a foreign linguist have an encounter. The ‘native’ points to what appears to the foreign linguist to be a rabbit and utters, ‘Gavagai’. Quine proceeds to show that what seems to be a simple matter of semantic equivalence (determinable by way of ostension) is not an adequate means of handling individuation, much less translation. Does the native mean ‘rabbit’ when she points, or does she mean ‘undetached rabbit parts’, ‘rabbit stages’, or something else entirely? Quine’s point is simply that *we cannot know*, and neither can we assume correspondences based upon our own ‘cuttings’ up of the world, a thesis called the ‘indeterminacy of translation’ or the inscrutability of reference. (Moreover, it makes no sense to speak of *knowing* outside of the constellations of inter-subjective corroborations that make up a language.) Quine writes, ‘If a certain linguist finds his translation of a foreign language into English a success, he might thereby

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<sup>211</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 2008), 20.

<sup>212</sup> Jean Laplanche, ‘Psychoanalysis, Time, and Translation’, in *Jean Laplanche: seduction, translation and the drives: a dossier*, ed. John Fletcher and Martin Stanton, trans. Martin Stanton (London: Institute for Contemporary Arts, 1992) 174.

<sup>213</sup> Willard Van Orman Quine, *Ontological Relativity and other essays* (New York; London: Columbia University Press, 1969), 53.

affirm his maxim on the existence of “linguistic universals or traits of all languages”. But he would be wrong; the maxim is *his own imposition*, toward settling what is objectively indeterminate.<sup>214</sup> Such impositions are consistent with the sort of grafting of intelligibility upon the social field so characteristic of capital.

Impositions upon what is, in any event, objectively indeterminate, lead Guattari to refer to capital in the terms of linguistics, of forceable meaning-making. That is, above all else, it is the primary task of capital to *translate*: ‘All of [Capital’s] “mystery” lies in the fact that it is thus able to connect, within the same general system of equivalency, entities which at first sight seem radically heterogeneous. . . . The function [of Capital] is always ultimately. . . . to connect heterogeneous domains and asymmetrical potencies and powers’.<sup>215</sup> It is why he designates Capital not merely an ‘abstract category’ but rather, ‘a semiotic operator’.<sup>216</sup> Only in the capitalist mode of production, he explains, does a ‘general procedure of semiotization’ become autonomous.<sup>217</sup>

When Quine argues that the referent is inscrutable, so does he suggest, alongside Baudrillard though with different emphases, that *there is no referent* (or as he famously writes, ‘There is nothing to scrute’).<sup>218</sup> This is uniquely evident in the following scene in which Owen and Yolland translate (or rather phonetically anglicise) the otherwise uncoded and haphazard toponyms of rural Ireland. This scene portrays what Baudrillard argues about the primacy, indeed the exclusivity, of the play of signifiers alone—the signified or referent appearing as mere phantom or ‘satellite’.<sup>219</sup> Consider the inscription of signifiers here and also the ideological investment in the display not only of ‘subject matter’<sup>220</sup> (Quine) but also in the performance of sensitivity and accuracy:

OWEN: Let’s get back to the job. Druim Dubh—what’s it called in the jury lists? (*Consults texts*). . . Dramduff—wrong as usual. . . And it’s Drimdoo here. What’s it called in the registry? . . . Dramduffy! Nobody ever called it Dramduffy. Take your pick of those three. . . . Now every Dubh you’ve come across we’ve changed to Duff. So if we’re to be consistent, I suppose Druim Dubh has to become Dromduff. . . . You can see the end of the ridge from where you’re standing. But D-r-u-m or D-r-o-m? Do you remember—which did we agree on for Druim Luachra? . . . We used D-r-o-m then. So we’ve got to call it D-r-o-m-d-u-f—alright?<sup>221</sup>

<sup>214</sup> Ibid., 34; emphasis mine. In the context of Friel’s play, the translator is the native intellectual who has made good in the city and returned to translate for the British army. One could argue that it is not ‘radical translation’ at this stage (1833) because the translator knows both languages. Yet Quine argues ‘[There is] a stubborn feeling that a true bilingual surely is in a position to make uniquely right correlations of sentences generally between his languages. This feeling is fostered by an uncritical mentalist theory of ideas: each sentence and its admissible translations express an identical idea in the bilingual’s mind’. Quine, of course, rejects the mentalist theory of language and ideas. For more on the bilingual, see his *Word and Object* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1960), 74.

<sup>215</sup> Guattari, ‘Capitalist Systems’, 268.

<sup>216</sup> Guattari, ‘Capital as the Integral’, 244.

<sup>217</sup> In fact, Guattari defines the whole of capitalism in the vocabulary of semio-linguistics: ‘From the first angle, capitalism may be defined as the general function of semiotization of a system of production, of circulation and distribution. Capitalism, the method of Capital, will then be considered as a procedure allowing merchandise, goods, activities and services to be valorised through indexing systems governed by a particular syntax apt to overcode and control.’ ‘Capitalist Systems’, 265.

<sup>218</sup> Quine, *Ontological Relativity*, 5.

<sup>219</sup> Baudrillard, *For a critique*, 143.

<sup>220</sup> Quine writes, ‘In facilitating translation these continuities encourage an illusion of subject matter: an illusion that our so readily intertranslatable sentences are diverse verbal embodiments of some intercultural proposition or meaning, when they are better seen as the merest variants of one and the same intracultural verbalism. The discontinuity of radical translation tries our meanings: really sets them over against their verbal embodiments, or, more typically, *finds nothing there*’. Quine, *Word and Object*, 76; emphasis mine.

<sup>221</sup> Friel, *Translations*, 37-38.



The brief mention of a referent ('You can see the end of the ridge. . .') does little to dispel the meta-linguisticism and sense of recursion that imbues this scene of the code imposing itself, almost as if the scribes were helpless to stop it from doing so. As Baudrillard postulates, 'Signified (and referent) are only an effect of the signifier. . . . Neither is [there] an autonomous reality that either exchange value or the signifier would express or translate in their code. At bottom, they are only simulation models, produced by the play of exchange value and of signifiers'.<sup>222</sup> In other words, it is not that there is an Irish reality that the code warps and misconstrues. The imposition of the code itself is the (violent) problem, not its ability or inability to render a 'faithful' translation. Another scene reflects a bit more awareness of arbitrary imposition (hence, 'but somehow that's neither fish nor flesh'), rather than the 'fidelity', of their choices:

OWEN: What is it called in the church registry?  
 YOLLAND: Let's see . . . Banowen.  
 OWEN: That's wrong. The list of freeholders calls it Owenmore—that's completely wrong: Owenmore's the big river at the west end of the parish. And in the grand jury lists it called—God!—Binhone!—wherever they got that. I suppose we could Anglicise it to Bunowen; but somehow that's neither fish nor flesh.  
 YOLLAND: I give up.

The theatre scholar Lionel Pilkington argues appropriately that 'The difference between languages in *Translations* is presented simply as a matter of signifiers'.<sup>223</sup> He refers to the fact that the play is entirely in English, though the audience is made to understand that the inhabitants of Ballybeg are speaking in Irish. Pilkington argues that had the play been staged in both Irish and English, there would have been a greater sense of strain and discontinuity or at least difference between the languages. As it happens, however, the greater sense is on continuity than on rupture, that is, inevitability rather than violence. Friel makes himself rather an easy target for my arguments about the imposition of a self-validating code by staging the whole play about the loss of Irish in English, so I will not dwell on this dramatic choice, but only echo Edna Longley's feeling that 'Friel's clever device in *Translations* of making the audience believe that English is Irish may imply more irrevocable loss than he intended'.<sup>224</sup> Pilkington makes the point that instances of supposed alterity, that is, the place-names that are going to be translated, are already translated from Irish: Baile Beag is already 'Ballybeg', Eóin is already 'Owen' and so forth. What alterity might have been posited is already diluted and domesticated before we have even begun. This lends the play an even more apologetic tone than it already bore, suggesting, in effect, that we are not so different after all. Pilkington writes,

That Irish appears in the play exclusively in terms of place-names [which are already anglicised] and that spoken English represents the Irish vernacular conveys an impression that the two languages are semantically equivalent. Indeed, so successful is this technique that David Rabey's recent survey of contemporary British and Irish political drama contends that *Translations* demonstrates the reassuring existence of an "all-encompassing understanding" between the two nations since it involves the audience in both Irish and English communities "by enabling them to understand the language of both, as does Owen." Indeed, the Irish vernacular is strikingly absent.<sup>225</sup>

<sup>222</sup> Baudrillard, *For a critique*, 137.

<sup>223</sup> Lionel Pilkington, 'Language and Politics in Brian Friel's "Translations"', *Irish University Review*, Vol. 2, No. 2, Autumn (1990), 295.

<sup>224</sup> Edna Longley, 'Poetry and Politics in Northern Ireland', *The Crane Bag*, 9.1 (1985), 29.

<sup>225</sup> Pilkington, 'Language and Politics', 294.

The ‘reassuring’ illusion of *unity* spontaneously occurs in *Translations*—or the projected possibility of unity as the result of the overcoming of linguistic/cultural mis-understandings. But this possibility appears tenable only because there is just one language at play; there will indeed be a certain kind of ‘unity’ once capital successfully overcodes the whole of the ‘primitive socius’. Indeed, one of the ways in which capitalism accomplishes first ‘inexorable growth’ and then the ‘closed perfection of a system’<sup>226</sup> is as a language that overcodes all other languages. Capital as code translates the known and knowable world into its own idiom and renders unthinkable that which is not itself. By articulating the knowable as itself, it successfully projects the terms and bounds of its own violent perambulations as the speakable horizon. (This is why such quips as Fredric Jameson’s ring true: ‘It is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism’.) Capitalism comprises a meta-language in that it is ever speaking of itself in reference to itself. Its movement is both expansive and recursive; it combines a ceaseless spread with a specular reflexivity; entrenching itself as absolute reference point and as boundary-marker of the perceivable. Capitalism, as a global and globalising formation, can admit nothing else.<sup>227</sup> It is obliged to asphyxiate everything which is not itself, that cannot be translated, or that confounds its equilibrating operations.

In that sense, capital’s mode of operation and inscription can best be described as tautological. As Wittgenstein argued in the *Tractatus*, ‘A tautology has no true conditions, since it is unconditionally true. Tautologies [thus] . . . lack sense’.<sup>228</sup> Tautologies cannot be argued with, because they are always true. One can gain no foothold against tautologies, because tautologies can never be ‘untrue’: ‘A tautology is a form of thinking whose truth cannot be tested because it is always true’.<sup>229</sup> And as Baudrillard emphasises, ‘Tautology is never innocent’.<sup>230</sup> The code of capital produces a ‘gigantic tautology’ in which ‘It is always a question of the same magical copula, the equal sign in  $A=A$ ’.<sup>231</sup> The code becomes unassailable because it cannot be logically refuted. Once this logic is extended to the social formation generally, i.e. the social logic of universal equivalence—then there is, in effect, what Derrida calls *cloture*, closure, a rigorous circularity. The ‘naive anthropology’ of *homo economicus* produces not analyses but an ‘immense tautology’, according to Baudrillard, who writes, “‘I buy this because I need it’ is equivalent to the claim that fire burns because of its phlogistic essence’.<sup>232</sup> Tautology already contains its conclusions within its premises. Arguably Brian Friel’s vision of

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<sup>226</sup> Baudrillard, *For a critique*, 93.

<sup>227</sup> Colonialism is the name of the ‘historical process in which societies of various kinds are differentially integrated into a world capitalist system.’ Joe Cleary quoted in Shaun Richards, ‘Irish Studies and the Adequacy of Theory: The Case of Brian Friel’, *Yearbook of English Studies*, Vol. 35 (2005), 270. Colonial capitalism is thus in some sense a redundant phrase. As capital is structurally unable to abide an ‘outside,’ the mere existence of viable (pre-contact/pre-capitalist) alternatives to its own logic threatens to destabilise its long-term conditions of production and reproduction—thus capital is necessarily destructive as well as colonial or becoming-colonial from its outset.

<sup>228</sup> Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, p. 98-9. He also writes, ‘Tautology is the ‘substanceless centre’--‘And from a tautology, only tautologies follow’.

<sup>229</sup> William Watkin, *The Literary Agamben* (London: Continuum, 2010) p. 124.

<sup>230</sup> Baudrillard, *For a critique*, 71.

<sup>231</sup> *Ibid.*, 71; original emphasis. Baudrillard continues, ‘Metaphysics and economics jostle each other at the same impasses, over the same aporias, the same contradictions and dysfunctions, condemning each from the start to unlimited circular speculation by positing the autonomy of the subject and its specular reflection on the autonomy of the object.’ *Ibid.*, 71. The autonomous subject as self-grounding (the cogito) is perhaps the most foundational tautology in all of Western metaphysics. Echoes of the tautology of the cogito are apparent throughout the Friel play.

<sup>232</sup> Baudrillard, Jean. *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, 44.

colonial change (with its conclusion of ‘inevitability’ already in its opening premise) is a dramatised version of this logic of tautology, or the social form of the general equivalent.

Capital circumscribes. Circumscription must be taken literally to mean ‘marks out/ inscribes’ as well as *encircles*. A circle has no beginning and no end, it has no exit, its path is always-already marked and it always returns to itself. *It* and nothing else is its own limit. When Spivak speaks of ‘epistemic violence’ she renders it as a ‘circuit’.<sup>233</sup> When Derrida seeks to describe the stranglehold of Western logocentrism, he refers to the ‘metaphysical orb’.<sup>234</sup> When it comes to the logic of the sign, Baudrillard writes, ‘The circle that legitimates the sign by the real and which founds the real by the sign is strictly vicious; but this circularity is the very secret of all metaphysical (ideological) operationality’.<sup>235</sup> And finally Quine states, ‘What makes ontological questions meaningless when taken absolutely is not universality but *circularity*. A question of the form “What is an *F*?” can be answered only by recourse to a further term: “An *F* is a *G*.” The answer makes only relative sense: sense relative to the uncritical acceptance of “*G*”’.<sup>236</sup>

As we know, the structure of the sign according to Saussure consists in the duality of a signifier and a signified—‘The linguistic sign unites, not a thing and a name, but a concept [signified] and a sound-image [signifier]’.<sup>237</sup> These dual terms, Saussure argues, ‘have the advantage of indicating the opposition that separates them from each other and from the whole [the sign] of which they are parts’.<sup>238</sup> Emile Benveniste will criticise Saussure’s model and construct his own, making the operative separation that between the signifier and the referent rather than the signifier and signified. Baudrillard argues, however, that both the signified *and* the referent fulfil a similar ideological function, which is to create an illusionary place-holder for what is no more than the free play of signifiers. Though referent and signified seem to provide reassuring fixities for the otherwise disconcerting vacillations of the signifier, seem to ‘anchor’ or ‘ground’ the signifiers, for Baudrillard they are *alibis*, standing in so that the signifier is given freer reign to create whatever truth conditions it may require in order to endlessly reproduce itself. Referent (and signified) do not strictly speaking exist, but are projections of the logic of the sign. (‘It is the world such as it is seen and interpreted through the sign’).<sup>239</sup> Capitalism maintains the fiction of the referent and the signified, of which it need have only a passing acquaintance, at the same time that it effaces both in the interest of its own self-referential looping. It needs to maintain some link to the concrete because of its dependence on labour-power, that is, the conversion of use value into new exchange values. (Some have argued that this link between abstraction and concretization may become obsolete with the expansion of immaterial labour. For the purposes of colonial map-making, however, we can surmise the need to maintain an illusion of Irish referents or signifieds.) The referent/ signified entails enough plasticity to contain either anything or nothing.

The possibility of ‘criticism or judgement’ is foreclosed by the ‘lack of sense’ available (Wittgenstein) in such tautological sequences as structure the code.<sup>240</sup> In tautologies, truth content remains unverifiable

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<sup>233</sup> Spivak, ‘Can the subaltern speak?’ in *Can the subaltern speak?: reflections on the history of an idea*, eds. Gayatri Spivak and Rosalind C. Morris (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 37.

<sup>234</sup> Derrida, Jacques. *Of Grammatology*, 162.

<sup>235</sup> Baudrillard, *For a critique*, 155.

<sup>236</sup> Quine, *Ontological Relativity*, 53.

<sup>237</sup> Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, 78.

<sup>238</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>239</sup> Baudrillard, *For a critique*, 155.

<sup>240</sup> Baudrillard writes, ‘Behind the formal opposition between two terms, [there is rather] a kind of circuit, a sort of specular and tautological process between two modalities of the same form, via the detour of a self-

(tautology is always true because it asserts nothing other than itself). If there is a 'reality' to which it refers, it is only a reality-effect of the code. Such epistemological closure is precisely what capitalism relies upon to entrench its 'stakes and interests', to saturate the spectrum of the thinkable. If there are links to the concrete, they are insubstantial, ambiguous—even *mirages*. Capitalism, according to Baudrillard, creates conditions in which 'the code no longer refers back to any subjective or objective "reality", but to its own logic. The signifier becomes its own referent. . . . The sign no longer designates anything at all. It approaches in its truth its structural limit which is to refer back only to other signs. All reality then becomes the place of a semiurgical manipulation, of a structural simulation . . . . The code becomes the instance of absolute reference'.<sup>241</sup>

We are left with an endless proliferation of code. The free play of signifiers ('the simulation model') has no internal imperative to self-limit; in fact, it has the opposite, which is to expand. When reality is an effect of the imposition of the sign, the ability to articulate alternatives becomes accordingly remote: 'It is the very genius of political economy, a genius that makes it immune to traditional Marxist critiques, that the signs exchanged in communication have no referent. Capitalism detaches the signifier from the signified, making the signifier its own signified. . . . There is no referent against which to define a finitude of needs because the code is its own referent and there is no end to the consumption of the code'.<sup>242</sup>

### iii.

The aptly named, *Translations*,<sup>243</sup> chronicles the Anglicisation of the toponymic life-world of rural Irish speakers by way of the historical Ordnance Survey of Ireland. Set in 1833, it dramatises the interactions this exercise of empire provokes between the inhabitants of Ballybeg and the cartographer-soldiers who would 'rename' them. The tensions in the play arise from the return of the prodigal son, Owen, who successful in Dublin, has come back to Ballybeg in the employ of the British army as a translator of Irish. His brother, Manus, has stayed behind. Manus's unofficial fiancée falls in love with Yolland, the soldier who is hired to oversee the translations despite the fact that they cannot communicate (he only speaks English, she only speaks Irish). When Yolland disappears, probably at the hands of the fringe nationalist element, 'the Donnelly twins', the British army moves in to raze the town-land. Despite all this, the bulk of the play is given over to friendly, amicable linguistic negotiations in which both parties are interested in the 'truth' of Irish place-names, such that they may be 'standardised [. . .] as accurately and as sensitively as possible'.<sup>244</sup> The Irish-speakers of Ballybeg display either an enthusiasm for English (Maire, etc.) or a dignified resignation to its 'inevitability' (Hugh, Owen, etc.). Only Manus seems distrustful of English and what this overcoding will mean.

The specular pairing of Owen (the cosmopolitan indigene) and Yolland (the Hibernophile who seeks to learn Irish, called by Friel an 'accidental soldier') constitutes the play's pivot. Within the character of Owen resides the cool intellectual pragmatism normally associated with the English, whereas the soldier Yolland

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proclaimed content; and the reproduction of a systematic abstraction (whether that be of the exchange value or of the code of the signifier) via the detour of the real'. *For a critique*, 154.

<sup>241</sup> Baudrillard, *For a critique*, 154.

<sup>242</sup> Baudrillard quoted in Mark Poster, 'Translator's Introduction', *Mirror of Production* (St. Louis, MO: Telos Press, 1975), 10.

<sup>243</sup> The play was first produced in Guildhall, Derry, by the Field Day Theatre Company on Tuesday 23 September, 1980. It was published in 1981.

<sup>244</sup> Friel, *Translations*, 43.

displays the sentimental romanticism to which the Irish are thought to be prone. One mouths the longings purportedly characteristic of the other and vice versa: 'YOLLAND: Do you think I could live here? . . . It's really heavenly. OWEN: For God's sake! The first hot summer in fifty years and you think it's Eden. Don't be such a bloody romantic. You wouldn't survive a mild winter here'. When Yolland expresses anxiety over the 'eviction of sorts' in which he is engaged, Owen responds, 'We're making a six inch map of the country. Is there something sinister in that?' Suzy Clarkson Holstein has argued that Owen's pseudonym, or mistaken name, 'Roland', is an echo, almost a duplicate, of 'Yolland'.<sup>245</sup> Friel's stage is the space upon which these supposed English and Irish cultural proclivities and tensions meet, mingle and cancel each other out. Clearly this liminal harmony is an expression of the ideal 'fifth province' of which the play is meant to be demonstrative.<sup>246</sup> That this mutuality and cultural equivalency falls apart (Yolland is abducted by the proto-IRA, and Owen's 'neutrality' falters when the army responds with a retaliatory invasion) is the result of an unfortunate error. The subtext is that but for these gratuitous misunderstandings, the fifth province would become a reality. But this too quickly overlooks the much more profound translations at work of which the historical loss of the Irish language is merely a symptom. That is, the play takes as a given that capitalist modernity is that which one, to use Spivak's phrase, '*cannot not want*'.<sup>247</sup> Though its effects are traumatic, it cannot not be wanted, and this already betrays something of the fundamentally tautological character of its logic.

Spivak's words are to some extent what Friel's play allows us to analyse—that is, what appear to be a number of responses to capitalist modernity which are actually variations on the same response—i.e., the inevitability of the code. Shaun Richards and David Cairns argue, 'Friel's dramatic objective is then not to elegize that which has passed, but to evaluate the viability of responses to that inevitability'.<sup>248</sup> Hugh, however forlornly, also uses that word: 'Yes, [Irish] is a rich language, Lieutenant, full of the mythologies of fantasy and hope and self-deception—a syntax opulent with tomorrows. It is our response to mud cabins and a diet of potatoes; our only method of replying to . . . inevitabilities'.<sup>249</sup>

*Translations* depicts the fact that modernization has to some extent mangled the life-world of the rural Irish, but it also suggests that such mangled, ineffectual people could not hope to survive modernization. The world about to be subsumed at the opening of the play is feeble and ready for extinction; because it is feeble and ready for extinction, it will be thusly subsumed. Pilkington remarks on 'the play's forceful impression that the loss of the Irish language is a regrettable, but insuperable, necessity'.<sup>250</sup> The signs are available for reading: the opening of the National School is on the horizon: ('And every child from every house has to go all day, every day, summer or winter. That's the law [. . .] And from the first day you go, you'll not hear one word of Irish

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<sup>245</sup> Suzy Clarkson Holstein, 'Carrying Across into Silence: Brian Friel's *Translations*', *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, Vol. 37, no. 2 (Autumn, 2004): 1-10.

<sup>246</sup> Friel writes, 'You can't deposit fealty to a situation like the Northern situation that you don't believe in. Then you look south of the border and that enterprise is in so many ways distasteful. . . . Someone has suggested, maybe it was Paulin suggested, that [Field Day Theatre Company] is a kind of an attempt to create a fifth province to which artistic and cultural loyalty can be offered'. "'The Man from God Knows Where": an interview with Brian Friel by Fintan O'Toole', *In Dublin* (28 October, 1982), 23.

<sup>247</sup> Spivak uses this phrase in varying contexts throughout her body of work. See *The Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard UP, 1999), 84.

<sup>248</sup> David Cairns and Shaun Richards, *Writing Ireland: colonialism, nationalism and culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), 147.

<sup>249</sup> Friel, *Translations*, 42.

<sup>250</sup> Pilkington, 'Language and Politics', 298.

spoken. You'll be taught to speak English and every subject will be taught through English').<sup>251</sup> The potato blight is also fast approaching: ('They say that's the way it snakes in, don't they? First the smell; and then one morning the stalks are all black and limp').<sup>252</sup> The characters are maimed and without-a-future. Everyone is speaking effectively *dead languages*: ancient Greek, Latin, and Irish. As Richards and Cairn argue, the critics who accuse the author of a nationalist apologetics, effectively 'ignor[e] the extent to which the play contains an auto-critique of such backward looks'.<sup>253</sup> Indeed it is difficult to reconcile accusations of a stylised Gaelic idyll with the pitiable state of rural Ireland in *Translations*.

'Inevitability' and 'nostalgia' only become really emergent or visible, on *this side* of a process already undergone. (We can speak perhaps of 'tendencies', even 'probabilities' but only a true *inevitability* after it has already been fulfilled as such. And nostalgia, of course, denotes a longing for that which has already passed away.) Now the subject position of this-side-of a global capitalism that goes unacknowledged produces the effect of galvanising the 'tendency' or 'probability' in retrospect and thus affirming a sense of 'inevitability'. Friel circumscribed his possibilities accordingly when he announced the apolitical nature of his *artistic* undertaking. When Fintan O'Toole asked how likely 'the power of art [was] to affect society'—especially a beleaguered society such as Northern Ireland—Friel replied, 'You can't suddenly say "To hell with all those middle-class fur coat people"—fuck them out we want the great unwashed. You've got to take the material you have. If you're into agitprop or if you're into political theatre or if you're into street theatre—that's their enterprise'.<sup>254</sup>

From this side of a system of the 'generalised exchange of signs'<sup>255</sup> looking upon a partially coded formation, it can look ugly (i.e., delusional, withering, and over-due to pass). Or it can look essentially like a modified form of what we have now, suggesting that it had been practically the same all along. That with or without the 'translations', which only hasten the process, Ireland and other 'peripheries' would 'naturally' have migrated into a version of the current configuration on their own.

Violence (or harbingers of violence, such as killed animals) erupts in the play, but it only arrives as a part of reported speech, hence it is doubly displaced from the main drama on-stage. This is a prankster's violence which will escalate into the suspected murder of the soldier, Yolland, by the Donnelly twins. The only actual physical violence is indigenous violence. Though the British military threaten to move in and overwhelm, even raze, the town, this is merely a *response* to an act of indigenous violence, which albeit extreme is nevertheless seen as a justifiable response under the circumstances. Violence in *Translations* is removed—seen as peripheral or accidental to overcoding—and not as integral to it.

Baudrillard argues that insurgency will come from the excess produced by the institution of the sign/commodity and not from any of its elements: 'Any basis for a crucial interrogation of the sign must be situated from the perspective of what it expels and annihilates in its very institution, in the respective emergence and structural assignation of the signifier and the signified'. Yet as a *remainder* from the process of signification it cannot be 'named except by allusion, by infraction'.<sup>256</sup> And indeed, we encounter enigmatic traces of

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<sup>251</sup> Friel, *Translations*, 22.

<sup>252</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>253</sup> Cairn and Richards, *Writing Ireland*, 147.

<sup>254</sup> In Dublin, p. 23.

<sup>255</sup> Baudrillard, *For a critique*, 87.

<sup>256</sup> Baudrillard, *For a critique*, 161. He also writes, 'This is the directive and reductive rationalisation transacted by the sign—not in relation to an exterior, immanent 'concrete reality' that signs would supposedly recapture

insurgency, disaffection and loss throughout the play, though they are deflected to the textual perimeters and are only partially explained or treated. A child spits on a soldier. The violent Donnelly twins haunt the margins without ever appearing; they are simultaneously owned and disowned by the villagers. Two horses fall to their deaths. A baby is born, circulates without a name, and then dies. An old man with a grotesque facial growth accidentally drowns himself in 'holy' waters. The Famine is foreshadowed by the 'sweet smell' and the rotting stalks. These, it could be argued, gesture toward the phantasmatic remainder. Insurgent violence would appear to be the way in which persons who have a 'non-marked' place in the code (Irish peasants, for example, but any subaltern or marginal group)—those who are positioned at the 'zero point' of the code—would best position themselves to 'oppose not simply an inequality in the code, but the code itself'.<sup>257</sup> The difficulty with insurgent nationalism is that it may well find itself—it overwhelmingly does—in opposition to an inequality in the code rather than the code itself. Tautology and circularity only amplify the effect, indeed are responsible for, this consensus on the inevitability of overcoding. In other words, 'the signifier is the sign that has become the sign of the sign'.<sup>258</sup>

Manus is the only one who understands, perhaps, that violence does not call itself by name. He questions the necessity of a military installation, though he understands that cartography and taxation (even a supposedly improved code of taxation resulting from the maps) are not without violence, hence he says:

MANUS: 'What's "incorrect" about the place-names we have here?  
OWEN: Nothing at all. They're just going to be standardised.  
MANUS: You mean changed into English.  
OWEN: Where there's ambiguity, they'll be Anglicised.'<sup>259</sup>

Baudrillard writes, 'The logic of ambivalence on the one hand, of difference on the other, are incompatible with the logic—sacred to economics [and linguistics]—of equivalence'.<sup>260</sup> The multiplicity of meanings and names that the soldier and translator(s) must confront suggest a congenital Irish disorganisation rather than an alternative social configuration that is unaccustomed to the 'terrorism of the sign'.<sup>261</sup>

Glimpses of non-capitalist remainders do not cease to appear, but they are de-cathected and abrogated, made strange by their failure to conform to the reality principle of capital. The patriarch and school-master, Hugh, says, as though the real tragedy would be to persist in the Irish language rather than to see it obsolesce: 'It is not the literal past, the 'facts' of history, that shape us, but images of the past embodied in language. . . we must never cease renewing those images; because once we do, we fossilise'.<sup>262</sup> He ultimately agrees to teach Maire English.

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abstractly in order to express, but in relation to all that which overflows the schema of equivalence and signification; and which the sign reduces, represses, and annihilates in the very operation that constitutes it (the sudden crystallisation of an Sr and an Sd. The rationality of the sign is rooted in its exclusion and annihilation of all symbolic ambivalence on behalf of a fixed and equational structure. The sign is a discriminant: it structures itself through exclusion. Once crystallised on this exclusive structure, the sign aligns its fixed field, resigns the differential, and assigns Sr and Sd each its sphere of systemic control. Thus, the sign proffers itself as full value: positive, rational, exchangeable value. All virtualities of meaning are shorn in the cut of structure.' *For a critique*, 149.

<sup>257</sup> Baudrillard quoted in Poster, 'Translator's Introduction', *Mirror of Production*, 11.

<sup>258</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 225.

<sup>259</sup> Friel, *Translations*, 32.

<sup>260</sup> Baudrillard, *For a critique*, 72.

<sup>261</sup> This is Baudrillard's phrase.

<sup>262</sup> Friel, *Translations*, 66.

Friel's play projects a metaphysical reality that 'holds still' regardless of the language into which it is translated. On their successes, the soldier and the translator boast, respectively: 'Each name a perfect equation with its roots' and 'A perfect congruence with its reality'. And when Manus points out that the British soldiers have mistaken his brother's name Owen for Roland, Owen says: 'Easy, man, easy. Owen—Roland—what the hell. It's only a name. It's the same me, isn't it? Well, isn't it?'<sup>263</sup> Pilkington writes 'The theory of language in *Translations* derives from George Steiner's idea that language is inextricably related to an essential privacy. . . . That the Irish language in *Translations* appears only as place-names is not fortuitous, but is crucial to the play's conception of identity as existing outside of language and social relations'.<sup>264</sup> Despite the fact that as Baudrillard argues, 'The very concept of the individual is the *product* of this general system of exchange',<sup>265</sup> the characters in Friel's *Translations* are already autonomous agents, who self-regard as discrete units with discrete 'privacies,' who speak of 'hermetic' 'private cores'<sup>266</sup> and 'interpret[ing] between privacies'.<sup>267</sup> Indeed, the play opens on the act of Sarah uttering her own name for the first time. An instance of self-performed baptism ('I=I'),<sup>268</sup> it is at the same time her entry into speech. Manus assists at her (self-) birth: 'We're doing very well. And we're going to try it once more—just once more. Now—relax and breathe in . . . deep . . . and out . . . in . . . and out . . .'. She finally manages 'My name is Sarah' to which Manus responds, 'Soon you'll be telling me all the secrets that have been in that head of yours all these years'. The most fundamental of all tautologies is the metaphysical subject; it is no surprise then that Althusser located the basis of ideological interpellation in the strange words of Moses: *I am that I am*.

In the character of Maire exist desires that are presumed to be (universal) general social desires: the desire for English, for a rationalised political economy, and a solvent place from which to express one's individual proclivities. The suggestion is not that these desires are *produced* by the apparatus of modernity, but that they are realised and actualised in it. As might have been expected, these assertions emerge as purely tautological. We must learn English because it is necessary to learn English; Irish is outmoded because it is outmoded. Maire states

We should all be learning to speak English. That's what my mother says. That's what I say. That's what Dan O'Connell said last month in Ennis. He said the sooner we all learn to speak English the better [. . .]. I'm talking about the Liberator, Master, as you well know. And what he said was this: 'The old language is a barrier to modern progress.' He said that last month. And he's right. I don't want Greek. I don't want Latin. I want English.<sup>269</sup>

Ireland, and its inhabitants, it would seem, hardly need overcoding. It, and they, are already basically the same in the 'periphery' as their counterparts in the 'centre'. As Scott Boltwood writes, 'In short, by the time the English arrive to supplant the hedge school with their colonial education system, there is little difference between the two. The English intend to replace an Irish system that teaches the rudiments of geography and mathematics, while emphasizing the study of Classical literature, with an English system that teaches the rudiments of geography and mathematics, while emphasizing the study of Classical literature. Thus, Hugh

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<sup>263</sup> Friel, *Translations*, 33.

<sup>264</sup> Pilkington, 'Language and Politics', 298.

<sup>265</sup> Baudrillard, *For a critique*, 147.

<sup>266</sup> Friel, *Translations*, 40.

<sup>267</sup> Friel, *Translations*, 67.

<sup>268</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 88.

<sup>269</sup> Friel, *Translations*, 25.



comes to accept the necessity to teach in English because he realises that *only the language of instruction will change*. Indeed, he states his belief that he will be able to run the national school as “[he has] run this hedge-school for the past thirty-five years”.<sup>270</sup>

iv.

Language, in its Saussurean form, requires the same metaphysical appurtenance as the commodity, in order to secure meaning and value, respectively. This dream of a total commutability of all values and signs, the dream of a closed system from which nothing escapes (and that which inevitably does is ‘barred and negated’) is not only a particularly colonial articulation of the spread of capitalism but it requires a mooring in metaphysics. What is remarkable about the code of capitalism is that what would have been required originally as an unshiftable alibi, a metaphysical guarantee—i.e., ‘the face of God’—becomes unnecessary after the ubiquity of the social form of the general equivalent and the commodity is complete. It is enough for the code to refer back not to God, to value, or to the ‘transcendental signified’—it has become sufficient to refer back only to itself. Though it could be argued that these are all but variations on the same theme of (metaphysical) closure.

‘The nostalgia for lost origins’—i.e., the metaphysical closure—*is what we are in*. Closure, tautology, circularity, the alibi of the signified and the referent, universal meaning unconfined by context, the imperturbability of the logic of the commodity and the sign—these are the ‘nostalgic’ yearnings in which all of Western philosophy and culture are tangled and which Derrida sought to expose and deconstruct.<sup>271</sup> As Spivak writes in her introduction to the *Grammatology*,

Derrida mentions the “cloture” of metaphysics. We must know that we are within the “cloture” of metaphysics, even as we attempt to undo it. It would be an historicist mistake to represent this “closure” of metaphysics as simply the temporal finishing-point of metaphysics. It is also the metaphysical desire to make the end coincide with the means, create an enclosure, make the definition coincide with the defined, the “father” with the “son”; within the logic of identity to balance the equation, close the circle. Our language reflects this desire. And so it is from within this language that we must attempt an “opening”.<sup>272</sup>

When David Lloyd, for example, looks to the Irish past for glimpses of alternative ecologies or instructive flickers of a ‘non-capitalist’ life, he is not indulging in nostalgia. He is prying open the circle of inevitability and self-reference. As Derrida writes, ‘To *exceed* the metaphysical orb is an attempt to get out of the orbit’.<sup>273</sup> When Deleuze speaks of the *ligne de fuit*, the line of flight or the line of escape, it is precisely this that he means. When ‘the exchangist conception finds it necessary to postulate a closed system, statistically closed’,<sup>274</sup> then it is up to the militant to seek out and forge new openings and new lines of flight. But its results will be somewhat unforeseeable, the movement unguided and the path poorly lit. Baudrillard writes, ‘Of what is outside the sign,

<sup>270</sup> Scott Boltwood, *Brian Friel, Ireland, and the North* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007), 158; emphasis mine.

<sup>271</sup> Derrida says, ‘Now “everyday language” is not innocent or neutral. It is the language of Western metaphysics, and it carries with it not only a considerable number of presuppositions of all types, but also presuppositions inseparable from metaphysics, which, although little attended to, are knotted into a system’. ‘Semiology and Grammatology: Interview with Julia Kristeva’ in *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Continuum, 2002), 19.

<sup>272</sup> Spivak, ‘Introduction’, *Of Grammatology*, xx.

<sup>273</sup> Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 162.

<sup>274</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 205.

of what is other than the sign, *we can say nothing*, really, except that it is ambivalent, that is, it is impossible to distinguish respective separated terms and to positivise them as such'.<sup>275</sup> Somewhat similarly Derrida writes, 'What exceeds this closure *is nothing*: neither the presence of being, nor meaning, neither history nor philosophy; but another thing which has no name, which announces itself within the thought of this closure and guides our writing here'.<sup>276</sup>

Without the imperative of a ceaseless extraction of surplus value, the code stops proliferating. David Lloyd writes, 'Irish resistance, or at least indifference, to accumulation, to individualism and to any wage labour not obliged by the ever-present coercive force of the rent, was sustained by the space and the values of the *clachan* and represents not some endemic idleness but a profound attachment to a material and moral culture that capitalism negated'.<sup>277</sup> A de-translation of the code is in some ways a reconstitution of a culture so dismembered. *Translations* is largely missing such inflections. Manus is perhaps the only character who bears these traits. He does not work for wages and shows interest in fiduciary matters only when Maire insists that a solid income is the price of her hand. Of Manus's 'worth' Owen says to Yolland, 'What salary? All he gets is the odd shilling Father throws his way—and that's seldom enough. I got out in time, didn't I?' When Manus is offered a salary, a permanent position, a home and his own hedge-school to run in Inis Meadhon, he does not want it, will not turn up to accept the position. When it becomes clear that Manus is set on flight, Owen says, 'I can give you money. I'm wealthy', but Manus declines the offer. He may well be tracked down by the British army and killed, suspected as he is of murdering Yolland, though the likely culprits are the Donnelly twins. Manus, furthermore, is the only character in the play who is able to speak English but almost never does. Owen says: 'Can't you speak English in front of your man?' to which Manus answers, 'Why?'.<sup>278</sup> On behalf of the confused (monolingual) British soldier, Owen pleads, 'Come on, man—speak in English.' 'For the benefit of the colonist?' asks Manus. 'He's a decent man,' Owen responds, to which Manus answers, 'Aren't they all at some level?'

What happens to Manus is a mystery because he exits from the parameters of the text. He literally becomes non-narratable because he walks off its edge, so to speak. He neither means himself harm nor does he show strong signs of self-preservation. His motivation for flight is overdetermined and he offers no explanation. The audience does not know what will become of him or if he will survive. He is going nowhere and he has no money. His 'story' is cut abruptly and becomes unknowable. Yet so he has escaped the metaphysical orb of the play. He is no longer compelled by the imposition of the English language or the constraints of modern political economy. He is neither backward, nor modern – he is no longer condemned to either obsolescence or relevance. He subverts the colonial gaze in which he is either ugly or already English. The final mention of Manus comes in the form of Doalty's imagined picture of him 'limping along the coast'.<sup>279</sup> Such is the melancholy image, somehow so appropriate, of Manus—his self-talk almost certainly *as Gaeilge*—tracing his line of flight, and 'limping along the coast.'

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<sup>275</sup> Baudrillard, *For a critique*, 161; original emphasis.

<sup>276</sup> Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 286; original emphasis.

<sup>277</sup> Lloyd, *Irish Times*, 48.

<sup>278</sup> Friel, *Translations*, 36.

<sup>279</sup> Friel, *Translations*, 61.

#### 4. Of Scatology and Eschatology in a Northern Irish Prison

‘What might a politics be that does not stem from the will to realize an essence?’

--Jean-Luc Nancy<sup>280</sup>

‘Il n’y a pas de grand Autre.’

--Jacques Lacan<sup>281</sup>

i.

What is the Gaelic language in a thoroughly Anglophone post/colony—Ireland—if not excrescence, excess, a remainder? And what are we to make of the concerted use of the Irish language under conditions of extreme penal duress—indeed, of the re-appropriation of this obsolescent language, self-taught and phonetically shared with little concern for conventions or correctness, accompanied as it was by a grammarology of excrement? What of the confluence of Irish and shit in a complex and politically wielded cryptotext? Perhaps most remarkable of all is the persistent good humour—at times a borderline ecstasy<sup>282</sup>—consistently reported of those immersed in their putrescent state. And finally what is the legacy of this strange episode (there is no known precedent) in Irish history, this Dirty Protest, conducted increasingly *as Gaeilge*, if not a “lesson” in both radical political endeavor and the poetics of anti-imperialism?

By April 1978, between 360 and 400 inmates at Long Kesh, a high-security correctional facility on the outskirts of Belfast, had begun to smear their own excrement on the walls of their prison-cells. Most commonly this tactic is seen as a means to an end—its severity an index of the threat the IRA inmates purportedly perceived in the Thatcherite government’s campaign to depoliticize the ‘Troubles’ and reclassify offenders as ordinary criminals rather than as prisoners of an anti-colonial war. The standard interpretation of the protest is that the prisoners sought to force Special Category status from the British state in recognition of their interstitial and politicized place. The brief tenure of ‘political status’, which some had carried in the Cages, would not be extended to those entering the newly-built H-Blocks. In less generous terms, the Dirty Protest is seen as testimony to British misrule, Irish animalism or both. Doomed in advance, it appears as a grotesque series of rites better left forgotten: an unsettling prologue to the main drama of 1981 Hunger Strikes.

The Dirty Protest neither garnered widespread community support nor achieved its stated aims of the restoration of political status. It is considered an overwhelming failure, a failure from which the protesters would have to be delivered by the Hunger Strikes. Otherwise they risked remaining mired in the pointless and repugnant stasis of life in one’s own excrement. Against this interpretation, the following paper will argue that the Dirty Protest not only formulated but also managed to enact an alternative sociality, a sociality which would be attenuated, not realized, by the change in strategy toward hunger striking.<sup>283</sup> The Hunger Strikes would

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<sup>280</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, trans. Peter Connor (Minneapolis, Minn., 2001), xl.

<sup>281</sup> ‘There is no big Other’.

<sup>282</sup> Ecstasy, derived from the Greek ekstasis, refers to the quality of being displaced from ‘self’, to be beside or outside oneself.

<sup>283</sup> Though I argue elsewhere for a very different understanding of the Hunger Strikes. See my “Even the Dead Will Not Be Safe: Famine, Hunger and ‘Messianic Weakness’ in the H-Blocks” (forthcoming).

reintroduce a more mobilizing politics of representation and sympathy and thus lay the groundwork for the phenomenal rise of Sinn Féin. But I will argue that the efforts of the H-Block prisoners were not redeemed by the return to legibility that was the Hunger Strikes, but profoundly diminished. Instead of the usual silence or mortification, this paper will go some way toward elaborating an analysis of the semiotics of revolt and the accomplished sociality that arose in the scatological season of the H-Blocks.

ii.

Maud Ellmann has suggested—quite reasonably, but incorrectly, I will argue—that in order for a protest to cohere as such, it must have declared intentions. It must provide an accompanying text with which to decipher its motivations and desires, lest it risk a ‘failure of signification’ and thus presumably, a failure of the protest itself. Because the Dirty Protest lacked a decipherable explanation that was adequate to the actions themselves, so is it understood to be a failure. Nominally, the five demands supplied this text—the right to wear civilian clothes, to be exempted from prison labor, to assemble with other inmates, to regain remission time lost as a result of participation in the ‘Blanket’ and ‘No-Wash’ protests, and the right to visits, parcels and educational and recreational facilities<sup>284</sup>—yet even the prisoners themselves were wont to regard it as a pretext rather than an explanation. The ‘real’ text is the fecal one, and collective writing is its protestant activity. In that sense, the protest and the ‘explanatory’ text are one and the same thing. But because the text is incomprehensible—it registers as a shock and an embarrassment to the British, Irish and Northern Irish establishments alike—so is it abortive, according to Ellmann’s thesis. Indeed, this is commonly how it is regarded.

Even the author of the fecal text is undecidable, making the intentions even more elusive. The text began to proliferate throughout all the cells without having originated in any one. The inmates responded to increased brutality from the guards by refusing to leave their cells to use the toilets and showers, hence the ‘No-Wash’ protest. In retaliation, the guards emptied the overflowing chamber pots onto the prisoners’ mattresses. When the prisoners threw their excrement out the windows, the warders boarded them up. The only way to keep the feces away from the bedding, or to keep it from accumulating in the corners, was to spread it on the walls. In the end, duration and community became more important than authorial intention.

The fact remains that within the usual protocols of intelligibility, the Dirty Protest has no satisfactory explanation. Without a more suitable analytic framework, it will remain opaque. Once the ‘tactic’ had exceeded its novelty, how can we account for the fact that the prisoners persisted in such a state? The radical outstripping of the ends (political status) by the means (living in shit for periods between nine months and *four years*) indicates not that the protest was simply perverse, as some will argue, but that the struggle for (political) recognition has been the wrong interpretation all along. The Irish language and excrement combine in the H-Blocks to produce a disordering of the accepted relationship between language and politics. The Dirty Protest operates at the level of a dis-integrated semiotics. It confuses the usual associations between signifier and signified by interrupting the structure of metaphor or substitution on which the sign is said to rely. That is, it excludes itself from a mechanics of representation thought to be ‘natural’ to both signs and politics. Politics represents the interests of the (absent) constituency, while signs ostensibly represent the (absent) referent. Yet

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<sup>284</sup> Allen Feldman, *Formations of Violence: the Narrative of the Body and Political Terror in Northern Ireland* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1991), 218.

the introduction of human excrement into the political arena constitutes the undoing of this paradigm. Shit as an ‘untransposable unspeakable’<sup>285</sup> breaks down the transmission function of language. Moreover, shit enables the use of the Irish language to encode sociality itself, not facilitate the transmission of a ‘message’ of sociality. By so collapsing deferral, it does not restore the fullness of presence, but simply discharges itself completely through its own performance. In other words, it enacts the thing it ‘describes’ until description is no longer necessary. Meaning is not hidden in the excremental text, awaiting interpretation. It resides in the production itself. The production and reproduction of the fecal text day by day and cell by cell—i.e., the commitment its adherents demonstrated to the repeated inscription of community across time—is the only ‘meaning’ available.

To put it another way, the Dirty Protest privileged metamorphosis over metaphor, metamorphosis being the process through which ‘language is no longer representative’ but rather ‘tends toward its own limits, and becomes non-subjective’.<sup>286</sup> It bears repeating that if the Dirty Protest did not *mean* anything, it was because *it had no message to impart*. Shit in the H-Blocks was not a metaphor; it did not *stand for* the objectionable state of Catholics in the North of Ireland. Nor did it symbolise the cloacal nature of militarised colonial-capitalism there. It sought a means to intervene in those fecal states, it did not seek to represent them. Furthermore, language in the H-Blocks was not used to articulate specific goals, as noted above, despite the rhetoric of the five demands. In fact, the Dirty Protest marked the abandonment of political language as a medium through which to ‘express’ discrete objectives at all and became instead a means to *bring them about*. The unique (anti-) semiotic system developed at Long Kesh must be thought of not as the symbolic means to transformation, but *as* the transformation itself. That there was no message, and that this did not abort the efficacy of the protest, contra Ellmann—if anything, it may have intensified it—can be summarised in reference to a problem Lacan detected in Freud’s theory of ‘acting out’.

### iii.

Freud originally developed the concept of ‘acting out’ in order to describe a subject’s inability to re-collect something traumatic—that is, to symbolize it in language. The ‘act’ of ‘acting out’ compensates for this failure, it is staged in the place of language and itself functions as an encrypted message,<sup>287</sup> calling out to be interpreted. The operative feature of ‘acting out’ is that ‘*it shows, it appeals to the gaze and calls for attention—doubtless in a provocative way*’.<sup>288</sup> Showing, demanding that one be seen, is more or less guaranteed to be ‘inducing, aggressive, and challenging’.<sup>289</sup> Indeed, Ellmann highlights the theatrical aspects of the protests, arguing that they are calculated to bring ‘shame on their oppressors’,<sup>290</sup> staged as they are for the eyes of Margaret Thatcher, though she ‘keeps them intransigently shut’.<sup>291</sup> Analyses of the Dirty Protest employ just such a framework of disruption and attention-seeking. The smearing of dejecta—shit, urine, and in the case of

<sup>285</sup> The phrase reads, ‘One might say that if metaphor always refers . . . [then] scatological deconstruction of this sublimating process is produced by contact with an untransposable unspeakable’. Dennis Hollier, *Against Architecture: the Writings of Georges Bataille* (Cambridge, Mass., 1989) p. 105.

<sup>286</sup> Jean-Jacques Lecercle discusses the replacement of ‘subjects’ with ‘collective assemblages of enunciation’ in *Deleuze and Language* (Basingstoke, Hampshire, 2002).

<sup>287</sup> Of which the subject is not conscious or even conscious that she is ‘messaging’. See Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (New York, 1996).

<sup>288</sup> Roberto Harari, *Lacan’s Seminar on “Anxiety”: an Introduction* (New York, 2001), 81; original emphasis.

<sup>289</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>290</sup> Maud Ellmann, *The Hunger Artists: Starving, Writing & Imprisonment* (London, 1993), 72.

<sup>291</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 104.

the women at Armagh, menstrual blood—on the walls of their prison-cells would seem an unmistakable instance of Freudian ‘showing’. ‘Acting out’ may even appear as a reversion to frustrated, pre-linguistic infancy and the antagonistic scene of toilet training. An ex-Prison Welfare Officer confirms this dynamic by invoking humiliation and the fraught childhood drama of the regulation of the orifices when recounting his time in the H-blocks.<sup>292</sup> The protest could even be seen as a severe form of petulance: though specialist sanitation crews scraped the excreta from the walls and chemically decontaminated them every ten days, the prisoners promptly re-soiled the clean cells.

Begoña Aretxaga’s valuable ethnographic work makes similar recourse to a strategy of ‘showing’ when she suggests that the protesters chose excreta because of its capacity as a ‘primordial symbol’ to provoke intense disquiet. ‘Primordial symbols’ are those that make use of ‘physiological material of great psychological significance and that are elaborated in one form or another in all cultures’.<sup>293</sup> Accordingly they may be deployed to achieve extremes of affective resonance. In other words, the prisoners sought to work at a level of affect and disturbance that simply *could not be ignored* (by the State), thereby proving an extremely effective means of ‘showing’. The noxious stench and intense visibility of the fecal cell were impossible to avoid.

Yet there is a marked tension, both irresolvable and unacknowledged, that runs throughout Aretxaga’s account, and which hints at the limits of the paradigm of ‘acting out’. The Dirty Protest creates an aporia, a deep contradiction between what *cannot fail to be recognized* (i.e., primordial symbols) and that which is *totally unrecognizable* (abiding for years in excrement). In accordance with the latter, Aretxaga writes, ‘This action . . . resonated with notions of savagery, irrationality, and madness’.<sup>294</sup> So are these behaviours unrecognizable or do they, in their trans-cultural significance, demand to be recognized? Unable to answer this question, Aretxaga shifts from Long Kesh to the scene at Armagh, where the presence of blood incurs the additional frisson of sexual difference.<sup>295</sup> Still she persists in the idea that the marginalized state of Catholics in Northern Ireland had created in the prisoners a fervid need to ‘figure’: ‘The claim to political status was so important to them precisely because it implied a deep existential recognition, the acknowledgement that one’s being-in-the-world mattered’.<sup>296</sup> If in fact the desire for this kind of spiritual clemency from the coloniser/Other ever existed, the prisoners had long since dispensed with it in the H-Blocks. Had the protests advanced from a deep desire to be recognized by the British state, then the protesters would always-already have failed miserably. This is because they would always-already have gone too far—that is, become unrecognizable—at that point where they tried most intently to force recognition.

The Dirty Protest has generally been situated in terms of ‘acting out’, as a strange but nonetheless discernible piece of ‘dialogue’ between the Thatcher government and the inmates, a process of negotiation for better conditions, ones which reflect the distinction between political prisoners and so-called ODCs, or ordinary decent criminals, and so on. Lacan would object that ‘acting out’—no matter how violent or disruptive—is *still a message for the Other*, the Symbolic order of Language and Law. As a result, a politics of ‘acting out’, though consisting perhaps in undeniably rebellious or problematic behaviours, must still be confined to coordinates laid out by the Other. That the Other must be able to recognize these acts *as* ‘political’ (i.e., orderly demonstrations,

<sup>292</sup> Feldman, *Formations of Violence*, 192.

<sup>293</sup> Begoña Aretxaga, ‘Dirty Protest: Symbolic Overdetermination and Gender in Northern Ireland Ethnic Violence’, *Ethnos* 23, no. 2 (June 1995), 125.

<sup>294</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

<sup>295</sup> Aretxaga adds, ‘If the men’s Dirty Protest was incomprehensible, the women’s was unthinkable’. *Ibid.*, 129.

<sup>296</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

determinate ends with appropriate means, discrete objectives which language is there to express and negotiate, and so on) will accordingly narrow the scope of possibility. This is because a political ‘acting-out’ has to remain *nominally legible* if the big Other is to register and heed it. Though it may be encrypted, the expectation, conscious or no, is that it will be decoded. Hence Aretxaga calls feces both a weapon as well as ‘a symbol of utter rejection’. However if I *symbolize* that I reject you, I have not really rejected you, since I remain beholden to your reception of my symbolization: whether or not you ‘get it’, for example, and what you will do next. My symbol can always be misconstrued. Symbolization connotes exchange rather than extrication. Yet if I bypass the ‘symbolization’ and simply *reject*, my action is impervious—indifferent, even—to your correct or incorrect interpretation. ‘Acting out’ always involves a more or less direct communicative relationship to the big Other. What is more, it presumes the existence and integrity of the Other by the simple fact that one addresses it and seeks a more solid re-inscription there. ‘Acting out’ works to consolidate the Other since it ‘asks the Other for symbolic restitution’.<sup>297</sup> Aretxaga argues explicitly that the Dirty Protesters are engaged in a desperate struggle for symbolic restitution, or as she puts it, ‘existential recognition’, from the British state.

Lacan, conversely, introduces the notion of the ‘passage to the act’ to distinguish those acts which seek not to adjust the subject to the Symbolic order and thus reinforce the order itself, but which strive rather to undermine and negate it. Unlike ‘acting out’, the ‘passage to the act’ is not the ‘bearer of a ciphered message’.<sup>298</sup> Instead it forces a dissolution of that bond of dependence which would confine the political to a dialogic messaging with the Other and entails rather ‘an exit from the symbolic network’<sup>299</sup> altogether. It is drastic and irrevocable. An unambiguous exit and dissolution are apparent in the Dirty Protest by way of a quick look at its basic units: there is the indigenous ‘non-language’, Irish;<sup>300</sup> there are naked bodies;<sup>301</sup> and there is human excreta. These are deployed as the *opposite* of message carriers—that is as *cryptotects*—the primary function of which is to avoid detection. Cryptotect communities avoid symbolic restitution, *they do not seek it*.

As Lacan makes clear, there is no big Other. The Other derives its consistency simply by way of the fact that we invest it with belief. The Other guarantees the meaning-to-come, *is* this guarantee, and we suppose that it does, in fact, *know*. The Dirty Protest worked by systematically annulling the big Other through a radical withdrawal of what sustains and upholds it (respect, belief, fear, etc.). The protesters did not presume that they could bring a case for recognition before a ‘neutral’ tribunal, because that tribunal does not exist. Neither could they negotiate with the British state to force better conditions within the prison or for that matter, outside it. Instead they reconciled themselves to the fact that this would neither be sufficient, nor even particularly desirable in the long run. They disentangled themselves from the Other rather than address it. The Dirty Protests

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<sup>297</sup> Harari, *Lacan’s seminar on “anxiety”*, 85.

<sup>298</sup> Slavoj Žižek, ‘The Undergrowth of Enjoyment: How Popular Culture can Serve as an Introduction to Lacan’ in *The Žižek Reader*, eds. Elizabeth Wright and Edmond Wright (Oxford, UK, 1999), 33.

<sup>299</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>300</sup> Irish as a non-language was the assessment as far back as the Elizabethan conquests, when Irish was thought to resemble voice (what animals have) instead of logos (what humans have)—that is, it consisted of unintelligible ‘grunts’, and ‘prelinguistic vocalisations’. See Pat Palmer, *Language and Conquest in Early Modern Ireland: English Renaissance Literature and Elizabethan Imperial Expansion* (Cambridge, UK 2001), 65.

<sup>301</sup> The prelude to the Dirty Protest, known as the Blanket Protest, began when seventeen-year-old Kieran Nugent entered the H-Blocks for the first time and refused the ODC uniform. Each ‘non-conforming’ inmate entering after him repeated this gesture. In order to cover their nudity, they wrapped themselves in blankets, hence the term, ‘Blanketmen’.

are the culmination of a collective realization that it is only by suspending the big Other—that is, exposing it as illusory and contingent, as non-existent—that alternative modes of sociality<sup>302</sup> can finally begin to emerge.

iv.

From September 1976, convicted paramilitaries entering the H-Blocks would do so without political status. Imprisonment under political status had been characterised by ‘communal dwelling’ and a ‘prisoner of war psychology’.<sup>303</sup> Inmates had been housed in Nissen huts, informally known as the ‘Cages’. Plainclothes had been worn, paramilitary hierarchy had been maintained, movement had been freer, and *Gaeltacht* (Irish-speaking) wings had been established. Cage 11, in particular, was well known for its left-wing liberationist ethos. Unlike more traditional nationalisms, the accepted thinking was that Irish struggle was theoretically and concretely analogous to revolutionary undertakings in other parts of the colonized world. Political education classes in Cage 11 included readings by Frantz Fanon, Ché Guevara, George Jackson, Camilo Torres, and others who were guided by a commitment to ‘the downtrodden, the wretched, the forgotten’.<sup>304</sup> Both Gerry Adams and Bobby Sands participated in a lecture series in Cage 11 entitled ‘Celtic Communism’, based on Marxist analyses of early indigenous social formations.<sup>305</sup>

The Gardiner Report was commissioned in 1975 to investigate Special Category status, the relatively brief tenure of which had been a concession born of the international embarrassment of internment and ongoing torture in Northern Ireland. Perhaps not surprisingly, the Gardiner Report concluded that the granting of “political status” constituted a grievous error and had to be rescinded. Despite the lower recidivism rates associated with Cages-style incarceration, Gardiner maintained that communal dwelling encouraged political violence, ‘[inmates being] more likely to emerge with an increased commitment to terrorism than as reformed citizens’.<sup>306</sup> The British state policy known as ‘Ulsterisation, Normalisation, Criminalisation’, would work in concert with the findings of the Gardiner Report to produce prisoners who were spatially separated and otherwise depoliticized. By interpellating political prisoners as criminals, guilty of individual deviance, the state officially negated membership in a politically engaged collective. As political status is one which presupposes collectivity, so is criminality imposed in order to recodify the prisoners as *individually* aberrant. Feldman argues that depoliticization corresponded with ‘extreme individualization’.<sup>307</sup>

The profound isolation of the prisoner is the more intuitive modern disciplinary arrangement, though David Lloyd has shown that far from being a spontaneous strategy, isolation is both an historically conditioned response, refined over many generations of prison resistance and containment in British and Irish institutions, as well as an ideological project that can be located as far back as the reform movements of the mid-1800’s. The

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<sup>302</sup> I borrow this phrase from David Lloyd; it is used throughout his oeuvre.

<sup>303</sup> Feldman, *Formations of Violence*, 152.

<sup>304</sup> Pádraig O’Malley, *Biting at the Grave: The Irish Hunger Strikes and the Politics of Despair* (Boston, Beacon Press, 1990), 47.

<sup>305</sup> David Beresford, *Ten Men Dead: The Story of the 1981 Hunger Strike* (New York, 1987), 42. He continues, ‘But it was an exciting group to be in, its members regularly cramming themselves, up to thirty at a time, into the small wooden “study hut” for lectures which usually turned into heated debating sessions. [Bobby Sands] read voraciously – his favourites including Frantz Fanon, Camilo Torres, Che Guevara, Amílcar Cabral, George Jackson and, of Irish writers, Connolly, Pearse, and Mellowes—keeping a fast-growing pile of exercise books full of political analyses, quotations and notes’. *Ten Men Dead*, 43.

<sup>306</sup> Lord Gardiner quoted in Tim Pat Coogan, *On the Blanket: the Inside Story of the IRA Prisoners’ “Dirty” Protest* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 73.

<sup>307</sup> Feldman, *Formations of Violence*, 152.



prevailing wisdom at the time maintained that the prison sentence should not simply involve punishment but should also ‘facilitate the absorption of the well-intentioned convict into the labour market’, such that the rehabilitative penal process in its entirety would culminate in a personal shift from ‘anarchic association to the economic individual’.<sup>308</sup>

The logic of individualisation at Long Kesh is duplicated in every possible register: spatially, by removing the inmates from huts to singular cells; visually, by encoding each individual body into a criminal’s uniform with a unique identifying number;<sup>309</sup> coercively, (in the intense solitude of the humiliated body in pain) by gauntlet-style beatings and cavity/mirror searches; and ideologically, by erasing every means of recalling organization. The prison initiation discourse included pronouncements by the guards to the effect that there is no IRA and ‘Each one of you is an individual’.<sup>310</sup> A number of the disciplinary techniques in the H-Blocks would appear to be directly imported from the notorious Castlereagh detention facility, in which all reminders and reminders of sociality or organisation were almost ritually revoked. One detainee said of the interrogation process: ‘They’re trying to make you feel that people outside don’t want you – that you are not a member of an organisation, that you are a basic criminal, that you’re only out to do this for yourself’.<sup>311</sup>

If it is axiomatic of penal institutions (and counter-insurgency operations) that the primary objective is to break the individual down, to splinter the personality or to smash the will, then the exact opposite is the case in the H-Blocks, where the aim is to combat collectivity.<sup>312</sup> The denial of membership in a collective, the denial of even the existence of (an) organization, characterises this dynamic. The thematic refrain insists that there is no group and even if there were, they would not claim *you*. This, and the words ‘isolation’ and ‘individualization’, recur throughout the oral histories. The individual—already neutralised by the architectonics of power, humiliation, and isolation—is not threatening to the penal apparatus, whereas a concerted being-in-common of two, three, or four-hundred men may be.

## v.

Aretxaga decries the ‘divestment of individual identity’ in the H-Blocks. But arguably it is the increasing willingness to divest of such boundaries that readies the prisoners not for an avowal of pre-existing identity—an avowal secured by the extension of additional rights, privileges, or recognitions to this identity—but rather for acts that precipitate a state of affairs in which this identity (indeed, identity as such) no longer has

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<sup>308</sup> Mary Carpenter from her 1872 pamphlet, *Reformatory Prison Discipline*, quoted in David Lloyd, *Irish Culture and Colonial Modernity 1800-2000: The Transformation of Oral Space* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 131. Lloyd writes, ‘Just as the cure for the Irish poor was intended to be their transformation from propertyless cottiers whose labour was sporadic and unregulated into productive wage labourers with a respect for the rights of property and accumulation, so the cure for the criminal class lay in the transformation of the prisoners “into honest self-supporting men and women”’. Ibid., 134.

<sup>309</sup> The women at Armagh, meanwhile, were allowed to wear civilian clothes and immediately fashioned a paramilitary uniform consisting of black berets and black tops and skirts.

<sup>310</sup> Feldman, *Formations of Violence*, 153.

<sup>311</sup> Ibid., 135.

<sup>312</sup> Bobby Sands elaborated the problems of individualisation and apathy in his thesis on the ‘Breaker’s Yard’, described here by a fellow inmate: ‘The idea of the Breaker’s Yard is that they’ll get IRA volunteers into jail. They’ll isolate them from the struggle by putting them through the fucking mill. Even if the brutality is not there, they’ll get you in and individualise you and isolate you within the prisons. They’ll divorce you from your structures and divorce you from your roots. They’ll turn out apathetic people who’ll be doing nothing but watching the gate for their day of release, and when they do get that day of release all that’s going to be in their heads is, “I’m not going back there”’. Quoted in Feldman, *Formations of Violence*, 161.

any currency. ‘Identity’ thinking is a classic example of ‘acting out’ because it seeks a better (more respectful, appropriate, equal) inscription in the Other. Within the context of late anti-colonial struggle in the North of Ireland, the discourse of Irish identity presents a problem in that it converges all too neatly with the requirement of post/colonial capital to produce an aggregation of autonomous subjects. The interests of the bounded, economic subject (and thus its relatively predictable behaviour, patterned as it is on self-maintenance and gain) are presupposed by the category itself. Identity facilitates the universal subject of capital, on condition that it is permitted to appear in ‘traditional dress’, so to speak. By the same token, the concept of an Irish identity may contain within it the potential content and traces with which to forge a being-in-common, but the *form* itself prevents this content from ever being realised. The being-in-common of Gaelic communalisms typified by such land tenure systems as rundale or *clachan* and the rich cultural formations that attended them were precisely that which had to be forcibly dismantled in order for capitalist rationalisation to take place.<sup>313</sup> Identity is duplicitous, because it holds forth the promise of being-in-common while ensuring that it is never achievable.

In order to explode the constraints of identity, it may first be necessary to *exaggerate that identity* as a means to achieve this being-in-common. Jean-Luc Nancy refers to being-in-common as the state of ‘no longer having . . . a substantial identity and sharing this . . . lack of identity’.<sup>314</sup> Using a language brought back from the brink of extinction, then, the speaking of Irish-Gaelic performs a certain intensification of Irish identity in order to overcome it, that is, to make its structure of representation redundant. The addition of shit to indigenous language allows migration from the particularity of Irish nationalism into an assumption of what is not particular but general: the excremental position. Borrowing from Rancière, Žižek associates the ‘part of no part’—that part of the social order that does not count, hence ‘has no part’, but which remains essential to the functioning of the whole—with the so-called excremental position. He cites the realities of the Dalits in India, more commonly known as Untouchables, who by their handling of human waste also inhabit the social role of excrement. Žižek maintains that the excremental position is the one which must be generalized as the vantage point of ‘infinite judgment’.<sup>315</sup> It is the point where shit and universality merge in a radical politics. Otherwise, caste systems of all kinds will be endlessly perpetuated, in the sense that ‘so long as there are castes there will be out-castes’.<sup>316</sup> Just as certain rights or recognitions conferred upon the Dalit population *would not change* their systemic position as filth, neither would the concessions of the five demands change the position of filth that was the disaffected, working-class Catholic of 1970’s Northern Ireland. Bobby Sands appeared to have realized as much when he stated (in anticipation of his likely death): ‘It’s not about a suit of clothes or a food parcel. I’m dying to make sure that the struggle continues . . . It had fuck all to do with the uniform. For anyone to believe I died for five demands is madness!’<sup>317</sup>

The ‘passage to the act’ is disorienting to those outside of it because it does not adhere to the logic of the bounded subject. We assume that all behaviour will ultimately reveal its internal logic or implicit motivational structure, because that is how we come to ‘read’ it. Yet the Dirty Protesters would seem to be operating against their own immediate and even long-term prudential interests. (But so do they point out the

<sup>313</sup> See David Lloyd’s brilliant historical analysis of this process of the coercive breakdown of rundale by colonial “improvers” in *Irish Culture and Colonial Modernity*.

<sup>314</sup> Nancy, *Inoperative Community*, p. xxxviii.

<sup>315</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Living in the End Times* (London: Verso, 2010), 23.

<sup>316</sup> Žižek’s paraphrase of B. R. Ambedkar. *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>317</sup> Quoted in Feldman, *Formations of Violence*, 244. Another inmate states, ‘There was more entailed in it than the five demands’.

poverty of those interests so construed.) The journalists who visit Long Kesh linger over and describe in detail the contrast between the filthy wings and the conforming wings, so unfathomable are the depths of the difference. The conforming wings suggest as normal a life as is possible, a life not so different from that of the warders. Almost all the conforming prisoners are Protestant Loyalists. Guards and prisoners enjoy ‘congenial’ relations, often sharing ‘casual and non-political conversation’ about such topics of mutual interest as handicrafts and physical exercise. The facilities are considered ‘top-notch’ and the conforming wings are ‘extremely neat and tidy’, with an abundance of what Lacan called poetically, ‘the goods that solicit us’, ‘the goods of the city, etc.’<sup>318</sup> These goods—a bed with clean linens, writing and study materials, the paraphernalia of hobbies, Elvis posters, pin-ups, family photographs, novels and newspapers—are still available to the ‘conforming’ prisoner. It is a wonder that the inhabitants of the filthy cells, meanwhile, do not either ‘crack up,’ says one visitor, or ‘come down with disease’.<sup>319</sup> The Dirty Protesters even *look* frightful: a journalist describes his impressions of the appearance of very young men who look very old, with long beards and long hair above the shocking whiteness of their naked skin. Their Gaelic is likened to shouts of ‘abuse and slogans’. It is a bestial regression being detailed.<sup>320</sup>

*All they have to do*, to paraphrase a commentator in the *Guardian*, is conform to prison rules, and they will immediately get back all the entertainments and basic comforts enjoyed by their conforming counterparts.<sup>321</sup> That what Lacan called the ‘repose promised by the service of goods’ no longer has any allure is what confounds the observers. The service of goods cannot compete with the accomplished social cohesion of which immersion in the Irish language became a measure. Excerpts from the following oral history capture a portion of the productive and even ecstatic nature of the H-Blocks event (and, perhaps, the ‘passage to the act’). This inmate describes the first time he hears Irish shouted across the wing. The relayed information is simultaneously manifest and covert: ‘We were all sort of amazed: “That was good!” It was like a magician’s trick to get a message across from one wing to another. We got up and started shouting, “Talk some more!”’ As the impetus to self-educate increases, so does the corresponding desire to avoid English. ‘The more you heard the more incentive you had to learn it. There was something magic about listening to these guys waffling away with each other in a tongue that was once ours’. The acquisition of Irish does not just break the relentless tedium of prison life, but adds a dimension of hopeful progression, of ‘eschatology’ to the scatology. Every Irish word added to one’s repertoire becomes a step further through that passage (to the act) where the timorous dare not follow. More practically speaking the cryptolect obstructs the guards’ ability to intercept messages, since Irish has no ‘etymological inherence’ in English, making it doubly hard to decode.<sup>322</sup>

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<sup>318</sup> Lacan quoted in Badiou, *Ethics*, 57.

<sup>319</sup> Peter Martin, ‘Stark Contrasts on Guided Tour through the Maze,’ in *The Irish Times (1921-Current File)*, March 16, 1979, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/528600426?accountid=9735> (accessed March 11, 2011.) Coogan recalls the complying cells in similar terms: ‘They were clean, in some cases adorned with pin-ups, in others with family snapshots. The quality of reading material varied from the *Daily Mirror* to works on sociology, politics, and literary works of all sorts’. *On the Blanket*, 221.

<sup>320</sup> Walker, Christopher. ‘Inside the Maze: H-Block without Inmates.’ *The Guardian* (1959-2003), March 16, 1979, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/186156316?accountid=9735> (accessed March 11, 2011).

<sup>321</sup> Anne McHardy, in her letter to the *Guardian*, states: ‘Simply by observing the rules—an essential requirement if good prison administration is to be maintained—these protesting prisoners would immediately have all furniture, books and magazines returned to the cells . . . and be able to watch television, listen to the radio and continue with their hobbies, handicrafts and recreation’. Quoted in Coogan, *On the Blanket*, 174.

<sup>322</sup> Feldman notes that Irish was a ‘comprehensive and mobile secret language within the surveilled environment’. *Formations of Violence*, 215.

Added to, appended, and studied by each in turn, textual production in the cells creates immediate compendia of radical political knowledge:

It was like a massive jigsaw puzzle. We were getting a piece of the puzzle now and again. You got another verb and the picture was starting to fill in. We were spending hours on it just writing everything on the walls. The men were using nothing but a piece of metal or a piece of lead to scrape on the wall. There were no textbooks; everything was just shouted out of the door. You always left a patch away from the shite on the wall for the Gaelic. . . . Everything else but that was covered with shite.

Meanwhile, the wing shifts became occasion for the discharge of excessive violence upon non-conforming prisoners by the frustrated guards. The specter of the wing shifts provoked a constant dread. Encountering foreign fecal material in the new cell—i.e., that which ‘belonged’ to others and that one had not yet grown accustomed to—was also a recurring trial. Yet the acquisition of new Irish appeared more than compensatory:

You would get shifted into a new cell, and there was this massive amount of Gaelic on the wall. You got a whole new vocabulary that you didn’t have before. You were expanding your Gaelic every time you were moved. And you would add your Gaelic on the wall for the next guy who was getting all that combined. There was *scéal* (news) and whole stories written on the wall in Gaelic. Some cells were like a big book. You had nothing to read, no books or newspapers, no TV, you had all that time to sit at that wall trying to figure the Gaelic out. You would check with the rest of the wing, does anybody know what a word means. Before I knew it I was able to communicate, to waffle.

The inmate describes the movement from confused bilingual code-switching to an increasing fluency in Irish and the corresponding disuse of English. Until this point, learning the Irish language had been considered an upper middle class intellectual pursuit. Through an appropriation of the language by the least, that is, the Northern Irish part-of-no-part, and its combination with an excremental (anti-)semiotics, we arrive at the remarkable place of an ‘Adamic’<sup>323</sup> renaming of the world: ‘The cell door was no longer a door but a doiris [sic]. It was no longer a window but a fuinneorg [sic]. There were four guys . . . who were fluent Gaelic speakers in the whole prison at the start. And from those four guys it went out and out. Within two years everything that was said out the door was in Gaelic’.<sup>324</sup>

The simple act of speaking the indigenous language in an ‘unauthorised context’ is already a strike against the Other. The language itself may be said to contain alternative social logics and a cultural store to which the Other has no point of entry. Even if we approach the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis with scepticism, the Irish language still erects an opacity that the Other is at pains to penetrate. Irish as well as excrement are cryptolectal because they simultaneously bind the group and block the violent incursions of the guards, if not from the physical body, at least from the oral, imaginative space of the lived community. Irish and excrement form an insurmountable barrier. Through the cryptolect, the community repulses the violent vectors of Law. It has historically been the out-law communities that deploy cryptolects in order to protect themselves from exogenous violence.

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<sup>323</sup> Feldman, *Formations of Violence*, 216.

<sup>324</sup> *Ibid.*, 212.

‘Acting out’ bears a ‘demonstrative accent’.<sup>325</sup> As a modality of showing, it requires the attention of the Other. The ‘passage to the act’, on the other hand, is not directed toward the Other but is performed in order to suture community, i.e., it is directed to the other inmates, who construct their own parameters of ‘meaning’. In the H-Blocks, excrement requires Irish in order to provide a ‘utopian vocation’<sup>326</sup> and to protect against nihilism and despair. Irish, meanwhile, needs excrement in order to affect a rupture with the ‘decolonised’ present, that is, the eternal present of post/colonial capitalism. As a kind of vanishing mediator, the excremental coating protects and enables the fragile being-in-common. Likewise, the spoken Irish—pejoratively called ‘Jail-talk’ after *Gaeltacht*—is a kind of shit. Even standard Irish is already the waste product of an almost complete Anglophone colonial-modernization. Its corrupted form in the H-Blocks compounds this ‘degradation’ still further: Jail-talk Irish is apparently unrecognisable even to speakers of Irish. Tim Pat Coogan, a largely sympathetic journalist, misunderstands the dialect and asks the guard if he can make out what the men are saying. The guard replies, ‘I don’t know, sir. They have an argot of their own’.<sup>327</sup>

What remains of Irish in the present day Republic is harnessed, perhaps unavoidably, to largely ineffectual government sponsorship, in many ways a nuisance to be ‘funded’. For political and ideological reasons, it is even more marginalised in the North. Though only four of the hundreds of inmates at the start of the protests spoke it with any competence, it became critical to the sociality that crystallised in the H-Blocks.<sup>328</sup> In fact, more and more, it was *English* that became the ‘contaminant’, English which had to be sloughed off as so much waste. Shit and the ‘debased’ Irish dialect permit what might be thought of counter-intuitively as a ‘purification’ of the Irish social body from the ravages of colonization. Feldman argues indeed that as a language of purification, Irish negates colonization. English, meanwhile, can more easily encourage its quiet perseverance.

That a radical inversion of this kind, a *reversal*, takes place in the H-Blocks is unmistakable. Despite financial incentives and leave allowances, the guards on the wings experienced ‘extremely high’ rates of marital breakdown.<sup>329</sup> Their own ‘promise of repose’ became tainted by their daily proximity to the protests. Female guards at Armagh were reported to have spent more time and elaboration on their hair and make-up as if to shore up their personal boundaries and avoid their own fall into a fecal abyss. Defilement, moreover, continued outside the confines of the prison. The smell lingered on the clothing, skin, and hair of the guards which they then took home to their families. After a twelve hour shift, it could take upwards of four hours for the smell to leave the uniform and body, though they had to return twelve hours later. The protesters began to see the guards as their uncanny and symbiotic doubles, since their lives resembled the inmates’ in striking ways. Both spent their waking hours in the spaces of the H-Blocks, separated only by cell doors. The guards were there when the protesters woke and they were there to close the wings at night. The primary difference, according to one

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<sup>325</sup> Lacan quoted in Alan Rowan, ‘The Place of Acting Out in Psychoanalysis: From Freud to Lacan’, *Psychoanalytische Perspectieven*, no. 41/42 (2000), 96.

<sup>326</sup> Feldman, *Formations of Violence*, 216.

<sup>327</sup> Coogan, *On the Blanket*, 227.

<sup>328</sup> Feldman writes, ‘The sociation of Gaelic speakers created the necessary anchorages for maintaining political/cognitive solidarity among prisoners separated by cellular confinement and twenty-four-hour lockup’. *Formations of Violence*, 245.

<sup>329</sup> *Ibid.*, 195.

inmate, was that the guards went home to sleep while the prisoners did not. One said, 'I used to wonder what did they spend the money on. By the time they get home, there's no pub, there's no *craic*, just straight to bed'.<sup>330</sup>

Furthermore, the guards had no totality they were working toward, no continuity to ameliorate the horror, as the inmates did. The ex-Welfare Officer said of the guards, 'They didn't understand it. They didn't understand the group solidarity; they didn't understand the culture, the Gaelic. They didn't understand how group morale could be kept so high. They couldn't understand the conviction'. As if in a kind of mockery, the relationships appeared to be stronger and more fulfilling amongst the prisoners than those in the deteriorating personal lives of the guards: 'Some of the relationships of the men who shared cells together were closer than what they [the guards] had seen in their own marriages. There was very close bonding through the suffering, and the prison officer didn't understand it. I personally saw the merging of entire personalities based on that sharing'.<sup>331</sup> The inmate had to choose between being-in-common and the repose of the service of goods. In the H-Blocks, they were mutually exclusive, yet in important respects, they came to appear as mutually exclusive on the 'outside' as well. In other words, it became *better* to live as a prisoner in eschatology and community, than as a 'free' individual in neither.

The normative attention to self—to its care, its projects and its ego-consolidations—would prove too costly in the H-Blocks, hence:

We found the thing by what one does, everybody does. If one's getting beat, we were all getting beat. If somebody smashed a cup in the cell accidentally, that meant that the screws would knock his bollocks in, as an excuse if he asked for a new cup. If somebody broke a cup the OC would say, 'Right, everybody smash the cups!' Everybody smashed the cups. He wasn't on his own; he wasn't isolated. There was security in numbers, that unification. Everybody acted together.<sup>332</sup>

As Jean-Luc Nancy argues, *community never was*, meaning it is not a lost state that can be recaptured.<sup>333</sup> Community in the H-Blocks was enacted repeatedly, almost ritually, at the intersection of the Irish (Gaelic) speech act and the scatological inscription. These complex performatives were saturated by the use of Irish, the linguistic community preparing for, prefiguring, and finally enacting the political community.<sup>334</sup> The Dirty Protesters developed—out of ruins, the refuse of their own historically besieged state, out of their own extreme vulnerability—a different language game, one constructed with and through literal excrescence. These strata of the inassimilable are the rubble of capitalist-modernity: the Irish language; the volatile, (violent) body of the 'criminal'; its modes of non-compliance and its waste products; and finally, the structures of deep sociality and oral culture.

Despite the notorious brutality of H-Blocks discipline, a former inmate can still say: 'The spirit is fantastic. The lads are very good to each other. I only remember one fight between two of the lads. You are all

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<sup>330</sup> Ibid., 196.

<sup>331</sup> Ibid., 195.

<sup>332</sup> Ibid., 248.

<sup>333</sup> He goes on to say, 'And yet the pure and simple effacement of community, without remainder, is a misfortune. Not a sentimental misfortune, not even an ethical one, but an ontological misfortune—or disaster. For beings who are essentially, and more than essentially, beings *in common*, it is a privation of being'. Nancy, *Inoperative Community*, 57.

<sup>334</sup> Feldman, *Formations of Violence*, 210.

in there because you want to be there'.<sup>335</sup> And while there is undoubtedly grave suffering, there is also the consistent reportage of high morale, even cheerfulness<sup>336</sup>—an affirmation of being-in-common even at the collective precipice of death. The 'passage to the act' confirms that 'exiting' is the only tolerable option. It is why Allen Feldman can designate the protest—without irony, because while it is not wholly literal, neither is it figurative—a kind of 'prison break'. The Dirty Protest amounts to a distancing from 'instrumental political action' in order to replace it with a 'systematic cognitive and cultural otherness'.<sup>337</sup> Feldman reiterates the idea that the prisoners indeed began to 'leave' the prison.

Perhaps most importantly, the inmates conducted their protests in the manner of the *as if*. They behaved *as if* the *Gaeltacht* were not in ruins, *as if* their indigenous social fabric were not in tatters, *as if* native oral culture (of history, story, and song) were still the locus of social life; in other words, *as if* colonialism had not shattered the life-world. In so doing—if only briefly, and in the most fragile of circumstances—they brought that state of affairs into being.

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<sup>335</sup> Quoted in Coogan, *On the Blanket*, 16. Coogan also recalls his conversation with an inmate about the 'millions' of little white maggots in the cells: 'In the same breath in which he was describing the retching details of the maggots, for instance, his face lit up and he began without prompting to give the answer to my unspoken question as to what was the mental condition of himself and his colleagues in the midst of all this. [He said]: "They gave a concert for me, the night before I was let out. One fellow did the tin whistle with his mouth and another fellow made music by banging on the door with his hands. They sang eight duets . . . They were really professional. They really put their hearts into it."' Ibid., 20.

<sup>336</sup> Coogan describes the Armagh women twice as 'quite cheerful' and 'highly motivated'. Ibid., 230.

<sup>337</sup> Feldman, *Formations of Violence*, 181.

## 5. “Even the Dead will not be Safe”: Famine, Hunger, and Messianic Weakness in the H-Blocks

‘What issues from the empty mouth? What speech follows the horrors of famine? What mourning can work through the memory of mass destruction?’

--David Lloyd, ‘The Memory of Hunger’<sup>338</sup>

‘The question of remembrance itself requires careful thought. Are we aware of what we are remembering?’

--Christine Kinealy, ‘The Great Irish Famine—A Dangerous Memory?’<sup>339</sup>

‘Of course, it is impossible to share another person’s hunger, just as it is impossible to share another person’s pain, and both sensations demonstrate the savage loneliness of bodily experience. Nevertheless, to formulate these feelings even to oneself is necessarily to call upon the common tongue and thus to reinvolve the sufferings of others.’

--Maud Ellmann, ‘The Hunger Artists’<sup>340</sup>

### i.

When the fungus, *Phytophthora infestans*, reached Ireland in 1845 and infected the potato crop, it would incur devastation beyond all measure. The population was composed mainly of the rural poor; the potato was literally their only foodstuff. The root was highly nutritious and easy to grow on the most marginalised land. The Irish peasantry consumed between seven and fifteen pounds of potatoes per person per day.<sup>341</sup> Though the ecological culture of the potato proved resourceful, both encouraging and sustaining an abundant population, the fact remained that centuries of colonisation and dispossession had entrenched the Irish poor in a deeply precarious situation. Resurgence of the blight and the destruction of the potato crop would occur throughout the mid-century years, turning the sole food source into inedible lumps of black, foul-smelling waste. Wide-scale catastrophe followed quickly. The starving left their homes to scour the countryside in search of digestible nutrition. The many accounts of corpses scattered across the fields and roadsides attest to this unceasing movement: ‘It seems they all fell dead out of their standing and the dogs eating at them’.<sup>342</sup>

Many died alone in this way, as the blight savaged the social fabric of the *clachan*. Those left behind were too weak to bury their dead. The sheer proportion of dead and starving (about one million) to the living meant the latter encountered the former at virtually every turn. The intermingling of live bodies and dead ones evoked the most disturbing *tableaux*, as the proper spaces of the dead became confused with those of the living,

<sup>338</sup> David Lloyd, ‘The Memory of Hunger’, in *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, eds. David Eng and David Kazanjian (Berkeley; London: University of California Press, 2003), 205.

<sup>339</sup> Christine Kinealy, ‘The Great Irish Famine—A Dangerous Memory?’ in *The Great Famine and the Irish Diaspora in America*, ed. Arthur Gribben (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), 240.

<sup>340</sup> Maud Ellmann, *The Hunger Artists: Starving, Writing, and Imprisonment* (London: Virago Press, 1993), 6.

<sup>341</sup> Cathal Póirtéir, *Famine Echoes* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan Ltd., 1995), 34.

<sup>342</sup> Ibid.



such as the baby who suckled the mother's breast even though the mother was already dead,<sup>343</sup> or the couple who lay on the cottage floor between their dead parents and dead children, 'nibbling grain from a sheaf of oats', too weak to rise and meet the visitor.<sup>344</sup>

The Famine decade<sup>345</sup> changes everything. It wastes the bodies and it erases the language. It scatters the population and dissolves what is left of social ties. The truncated and broadly ineffectual relief efforts of the British government were hampered by both *laissez faire* economic philosophy and a racialised distrust of the Irish. There was not only a lack of incentive to intervene decisively in the crisis, but also perceived benefits to be had from avoiding action. The winnowing of a superfluous population would allow long-sought-after modernisations to take place, such as the conversion of patchwork, uneconomic smallholdings into consolidated, large-scale pasture land. What relief was offered tended to hasten mortality rather than alleviate it: public works projects, for example, provided relief in exchange for hard labour. But most relief recipients were already too weak to perform such tasks and often collapsed on site. Subsequent crowding also quickened the spread of infectious disease.<sup>346</sup>

In many ways, the Famine corpse ('emaciated . . . partly green from eating docks and nettles and partly blue from the cholera and dysentery'<sup>347</sup>) is a condensed signifier for the violent convulsions of the peripheries as they incorporated into the global market by colonial-capitalism. The Famine, indeed, constituted the apotheosis of the spread and enforcement of that historically unique system of exchange entitlements, in which it becomes possible to say, not that there *is no food*, but simply that you cannot have any. Contemporary commentators have remarked on the large amounts of food still leaving Ireland for export to British markets during the Famine years, often escorted under militarised guard. It is suggested that the word 'starvation' or *An Gorta Mór* would be a more appropriate designation than 'famine' since famine connotes a dearth of food. But Amartya Sen suggests that this is always the case: famine means food is available, just not for those without adequate exchange entitlements.<sup>348</sup> The Famine entails the ravages of the logic of capital accelerated and compounded, as through a time-lapse camera. If there is no more revealing reflection of the structural relationship between colonialism and capitalism than the Famine, then, again, there is no more apt signifier for the convergence of instrumental political economy and racial antipathy than the starving Irish body. Likewise, as Allen Feldman has argued, there is no more 'eloquent demonstration' than the corpse of the Hunger Striker of the 'condition and image of the human body infested with the state apparatus'.<sup>349</sup>

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<sup>343</sup> Ibid., 91.

<sup>344</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>345</sup> There has been controversy regarding the dates of the Famine. Charles Trevelyan declared it officially 'over' in 1847, the most devastating year in terms of loss of life, but crop failures brought on by the blight continued for another five years with repercussions extending well beyond 1852. It has prompted Christine Kinealy to refer to a Famine 'decade'. Still, the Irish government apparently accepted 1847 as an end date because the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary commemorations were concluded in 1997. See Christine Kinealy's discussion of relevant dates and their political implications in her essay 'The Great Irish Famine—A Dangerous Memory?', 239-254.

<sup>346</sup> See James S. Donnelly's excellent introductory work, *The Great Irish Potato Famine* (Stroud, UK: Sutton, 2002), for an overview of relief works and other aspects of famine history.

<sup>347</sup> Quoted in Cathal Póirtéir, *Famine Echoes*, 90.

<sup>348</sup> See his *Poverty and famines: an essay on entitlement and deprivation* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1981).

<sup>349</sup> Allen Feldman, *Formations of Violence: The Narrative of the Body and Political Terror in Northern Ireland* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 236.

If, as David Lloyd notes, the Famine is first and foremost a colonial (capitalist) catastrophe,<sup>350</sup> then I will argue that the 1981 Hunger Strikes, through the fiercely anti-imperial discourse in which they were embedded, should be read as a ‘repetition’ of the Famine. That is, the Hunger Strikes emerge as its evocative *restaging*, as a (concentrated) political gestus meant not simply to remember or memorialise the Famine dead, but in Walter Benjamin’s sense, to redeem them. A bio-politics of memory can find no purer actualisation than corporeal repetition in the service of revolutionary redress. It will be pointed out right away, however, that the Strikers themselves made no explicit claim to bearing the Famine dead in mind. Yet I would argue that they need not have been conscious of the repetitive quality of their acts, of their mimetic or repetitive structure, for the ordering principles of a Benjaminian ethos to have prevailed in the H-Blocks. Freud would say that it could not have been otherwise. A new sort of ‘melancholy’ politics was underway in the H-Blocks—an anti-imperial politics of affect, recuperation, and being-in-common. This was already clear to the inmates as well as the Republican leadership, who met it with suspicion and trepidation, even if none of them could have so named it. The usual concerns and strategies of IRA nationalism were dislodged and reformulated in the H-Blocks in accord with a greater radicalism and an increased awareness of the similitude of all the ‘wretched of the earth’, irrespective of geography or era.

ii.

In his early career, Freud distinguished between melancholy and mourning. He viewed melancholy as a hobbled state that inhibited mourning, a pathological disposition wherein the patient could not adapt to the suffered loss and move on. Mourning, meanwhile, was that process of adjustment through which the patient came to accept death or catastrophe, and with time, to recover from trauma. The melancholic cannot accept things as they are; it is she who fails, for whatever reason, to lay the violence and shock of the past to rest. We may know the melancholic by her so-called ‘compulsion to repeat’. Freud argued that for the melancholic, the loss had been withdrawn from consciousness, as opposed to the one who mourned, for whom ‘no aspect of the loss is unconscious’. In fact this unnameable quality of loss—the indeterminacy of its parameters, its unknowability—contributed to the urgency with which it persisted and drove the compulsion to repeat. Being unable to directly acknowledge what has been lost accords with what Marcia Cavell deems the tendency of the melancholic to ‘make a ghost of the lost object’ and preserve it by ‘repetitively acting out its return’.<sup>351</sup> She states, ‘While the one who has mourned is free to find a new and genuinely gratifying love, the melancholic is condemned to a form of passive repetition’.<sup>352</sup>

This delineation between melancholy and mourning at the psychic level corresponds to similar responses to trauma at the socio-cultural level. The Irish Republic, for example, has officially mourned the Famine and gone on to literally more productive national pursuits. As an entity, it has ‘freed’ itself to move on to more genuine and ‘gratifying’ exploits rather than remain transfixed in the past. We might recall Brian Friel’s famous injunction from *Translations*: ‘It is not the literal past, the ‘facts’ of history, that shape us, but images of

<sup>350</sup> He writes, ‘The Famine, whatever else we wish to say about its contours and meaning, must be seen as a colonial catastrophe. This fact, it seems to me, complicates greatly what it has meant, in our recent commemoration of it, to mourn the Famine.’ David Lloyd, *Irish Times: Temporalities of Modernity* (Dublin: Field Day in association with the Keough-Naughton Institute at the University of Notre Dame, 2008), 31.

<sup>351</sup> Marcia Cavell, ‘Keeping Time: Remembering, Repeating and Working Through’, in *Becoming a Subject: Reflections in Philosophy and Psychoanalysis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 57.

<sup>352</sup> Cavell, ‘Keeping Time’, 57.

the past embodied in language. . . we must never cease renewing those images; because once we do, we fossilise.' To 'fossilise', to fail to look ahead, is tantamount to being 'condemned to a form of passive repetition.' The perceived necessity to move on, moreover, is more than a little impelled by economic exigencies. Melancholic attachments obstruct the production demands of a modernising economy. The example of official mourning which best captures these implicit contradictions is the elevation of the largely obsolescent Irish language to the position of 'first official language', despite the fact that almost no-one speaks it.

The connection between Freud's 'melancholy' and Benjamin's 'historical materialism' insists in both thinkers' notion of the past as fundamentally *open*.<sup>353</sup> Whereas Freud saw melancholy openness as a psychic affliction which should ultimately be subsumed by mourning, Benjamin saw temporal porosity as a crucial aspect of radical political endeavour. For Benjamin, it is the memory of one's 'enslaved ancestors',<sup>354</sup> that drives the revolutionary imperative rather than the vision of an ideal future. In related fashion, David Lloyd asks, is not rage the more appropriate response to the Famine than mournful detachment? The one who mourns, according to Freud, is the one who has successfully decathected from loss and become an autonomous subject, adjusting to 'the way things are'. In the H-Blocks, repeating trauma permits not a 'coming to terms' with the past, but rather a means to animate it into the present and thus rectify past wrongs. Mourning fixes and rigidifies the past. It is a saying goodbye, so that the past is 'declared resolved, finished, and dead, [whereas] in melancholia the past remains steadfastly alive in the present'.<sup>355</sup> Moreover, the strikers utilise the Irish language, what Matthew Arnold called 'the badge of a beaten race',<sup>356</sup> in order to forge a temporal ataxia between the famishing past and the famishing present. Speaking the language of the dead is already a species of resurrection. The language becomes the means of conveyance, the way to invoke and layer several temporalities at once. It shifts the (famishing) speakers into Benjamin's 'messianism,' that is, 'a zone of undecidability, in which the past is dislocated into the present and the present is extended into the past'.<sup>357</sup> The Hunger Strikers believed that the spectacle of their starved corpses leaving the prison—these signifiers as reminders of colonial catastrophe—would ignite the Benjaminian 'spark' on the streets of Belfast and beyond. For 'messianism' is not just a singularity but a collective cathexis. In Benjamin's hands, neither is it an onto-theology, but the opposite: it recognises that there is no God and thus we have to do it ourselves. Messianism faces the absence of God without flinching.<sup>358</sup>

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<sup>353</sup> This connection between Freud and Benjamin is made in an accomplished way by David L. Eng and David Kazanjian in 'Introduction: Mourning Remains', *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, 1-26.

<sup>354</sup> Benjamin argues rather, 'This training made the working class forget both its hatred and its spirit of sacrifice, for both are nourished by the image of enslaved ancestors rather than that of liberated grandchildren'. 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zorn (London: Pimlico, 1999), 252.

<sup>355</sup> Eng and Kazanjian, 'Introduction: Mourning Remains', 3-4.

<sup>356</sup> David Cairns and Shaun Richards, *Writing Ireland: colonialism, nationalism and culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), 46.

<sup>357</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *The Time the Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, trans. Patricia Dailey (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 74.

<sup>358</sup> Agamben states, 'He who upholds himself in the messianic vocation . . . knows that in messianic time the saved world coincides with the world that is irretrievably lost, and that . . . he must now really live in a world without God. This means he may not disguise this world's being-without-God in any way'. *Ibid.*, 42.

Excess mortality and the drastic erosion of the language go hand in hand. The Famine sounded the death knell for the Irish language. As one historian notes, ‘It also confirmed a relationship between the Irish language and poverty, in all its meanings’.<sup>359</sup> The contiguity of starving and speaking Irish is historically acute such that autophagy and glottophagy meet and coincide. Autophagy is that “self-eating” mechanism whereby the body compensates a drastic reduction of calories by attempting to maintain cellular homeostasis. In the absence of any other nutritive intake, the body will digest its only available source of calories, itself. The exact point at which autophagy ceases to be ‘prosurvival’ and instead becomes ‘prodeath’<sup>360</sup> is poorly understood within the metabolic sciences. Glottophagy (*glottophagie*), meanwhile, is a term elaborated by the French sociolinguist Louis-Jean Calvet in his book, *Linguistique et colonialisme*.<sup>361</sup> Though similar to the Anglophone colonial studies concept of ‘cultural imperialism’ or ‘linguistic imperialism’, Calvet’s term differs in its emphasis on the scene of a *devouring*. Glottophagy refers to that process by which an indigenous language is ‘eaten’ by an imperial one, a process he also refers to as ‘linguistic cannibalism’.<sup>362</sup> Both autophagy and glottophagy are, in this context, colonial afflictions. As the bodies of famine victims weaken and either scatter in mass emigration or self-consume unto disease and death, so does the language expire with its speakers. In a rather obvious but no less profound sense, there must be Irish bodies if there are to be Irish speech acts. There must be speakers, if there is to be language.

It is only after the language collapses that the term *Gaeltacht* (Irish-speaking area) comes to have any meaning.<sup>363</sup> Prior to that point, one would simply say some version of ‘Ireland’ when she wanted to refer to ‘Irish-speaking area’, (with the exception of the Pale) since those had not yet become discontinuous. The term arises when it is understood that the sign ‘Ireland’ no longer refers to ‘Irish speaking area’ but instead to ‘non-Irish speaking’ or ‘Anglophone’ area. When Irish-speaking itself becomes a rarity, only then does *Gaeltacht* emerge as a meaningful referent. With less than 6% of the total area of the island designated *Gaeltacht*, the phrase recognises at one and the same time the fact that Irish-speaking *was* but that it is no longer.

In the H-Blocks, the prison protesters acquired the Irish language with urgency and against all odds. Out of hundreds in the H-Blocks, there were only four speakers with any competence in the language at the outset. Officially banned until 1982, their auto-didacticism was technically illegal. They used visits from the priests as occasions to obtain clandestine materials and vocabulary. Upon visiting to say Mass, the priest was often expected to provide Irish, too, if only a few words and sentences.<sup>364</sup> In place of more traditional

<sup>359</sup> Diarmait Mac Giolla Chríost, *The Irish Language in Ireland: From Góidel to Globalisation* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2005), 101. Conversely, the ‘revival’ spurred on by Douglas Hyde and the Gaelic League will be composed of an ‘English-speaking, urban-dwelling and Catholic middle class’. *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>360</sup> See Chanhee Kang and Leon Avery, ‘To be or not to be, the level of autophagy is the question: Dual roles of autophagy in the survival response to starvation’, *Autophagy* 4:1 (1 January 2008): 82-84.

<sup>361</sup> See Louis-Jean Calvet, *Linguistique et colonialisme, petit traité de glottophagie* (Paris: Payot, 1979 and 1988).

<sup>362</sup> He writes, “‘Linguistic cannibalism,’ then, is a process inherent in any colonial dominance, and can be read at different levels: how languages are described, how social communication is organised, the system of word-borrowings, the names people give each other, feelings of guilt at using native languages, and so on’. *Ibid.*, ix.

<sup>363</sup> Coimisiún na Gaeltachta (Gaeltacht Commission) is established after the creation of the Irish Free State. In 1926, *na Gaeltachtaí* were defined ‘at district electoral level according to linguistic criteria’ mostly according to data gathered in the 1911 Census. Mac Giolla Chríost, *Irish Language in Ireland*, 113.

<sup>364</sup> Lisa Goldenberg, *Symbolic Significance of the Irish Language in the Northern Ireland Conflict* (Blackrock, Co. Dublin: St. Columba Press, 2002), 76.

contraband, the protesters smuggled in short stories and grammar lessons in Irish. Ex-inmate Peadar Whelan recalls, ‘These pages came down in the illicit tobacco parcels, the gold dust of the H-Blocks—the sacrifice of this valuable space shows the importance attached to Irish! . . . We had to fight to learn, and speaking it was a form of resistance’.<sup>365</sup>

Playing on *Gaeltacht*, the term ‘Jailtacht’ emerged around this time. ‘Jailtacht’ bespeaks the acquired nature of the tongue, as opposed to *Gaeltacht*, which signifies an accident of birth and geography. Without native speakers, however, or anyone with a formal education in its usage, ‘Jailtacht’ communicates the crude character of the H-Block dialect. In the absence of writing materials or books, instruction was largely oral and thus phonetic. There was no professional tuition, of course, and the dialect mixed an Ulster *blás* with a series of Jail-talk idioms to produce an adulterated linguistic variant. H-Block Irish produced grammatical and pronunciation errors that became established and duplicated. Yet its very ‘imperfection’ served to mark it as a practice—one not extractable from the lived environment—rather than as a matter for concern over ‘correctness’. Deleuze and Guattari are energetic on this point—‘[Grammaticality] is a power marker before it is a syntactical marker’<sup>366</sup>—and we can see ‘Jailtacht’ as a subversion of what they call the ‘power takeover’ inherent in the spread of English to Ireland and elsewhere. We can also see it as a subversion of proper textbook Irish by those who would not have had the chance to learn it in school, including an apprentice bus builder (Bobby Sands), a milkman (Raymond McCreesh), a bricklayer (Kevin Lynch), and so on. Most of the Famine Irish would not have been literate, much less educated. The Jailtacht Irish is both oral and ‘incorrect’. Yet the pejorative term ‘Jailtacht’ also conveys anxiety over the abandonment of ‘purity’ nationalisms. As David Lloyd writes, ‘Irish nationalism, in its early theory, as in its later practices, has always sought to be an instrument of bourgeois hegemony’.<sup>367</sup> Thus the tension between the working-class radicalism of the H-Blocks and more traditional cultural nationalism is evinced in the following, when a standard Irish speaker encounters the Blanketmen: ‘The Gaelic we were learning, we spoke with our natural accents, which is rough. This woman after the protest was over came up from the Free State; she was the first Gaelic news reader on RTE. She had a terrible elitist attitude toward the language. She once said to me, “When I hear the Gaelic spoken here in the Blocks it makes me shudder”’.<sup>368</sup>

Concerns over purity insist, it would seem, because cultural nationalism must occupy itself with proving the coloniser ‘wrong’. That is, cultural nationalism asserts that it too has a noble tradition of epic heroism, high art, and other forms of elite cultural treasure (such as the literature of the Irish language). The fact that we were colonised at all, it seems to say, was a great error in judgment, a fact which we can amply prove. Such traditions are ‘invented’<sup>369</sup> in order to convince the colonised as well as the coloniser. Yet The H-Blocks

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<sup>365</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>366</sup> They go on to write, ‘Forming grammatically correct sentences is for the normal individual a prerequisite for any submission to social laws. No one is supposed to be ignorant of grammaticality; those who are belong in special institutions’. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: capitalism and schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (London: Continuum Books, 2004), 112.

<sup>367</sup> David Lloyd, ‘Spirit of the Nation’, in *Theorizing Ireland*, ed. Claire Connolly (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003) 172.

<sup>368</sup> The inmate goes on: ‘I said, “When you hear the Gaelic in here you’re hearing it as a living language. It’s spoken and evolving in a natural environment. Your Gaelic is put in a glass case as a showpiece. We have a living language. Yours is an artificial thing. For you it’s an academic achievement, while for us it’s something that lives, and that comes from our day-to-day situation”’. Feldman, *Formations of Violence*, 214.

<sup>369</sup> See *The invention of tradition*, eds. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992, c1983).

protesters, as I argued in the previous chapter, are not interested in sending such messages to the coloniser/Other, in part because there is not even a language or an idiom in which to mount such an ‘argument’ that does not already belong to the colonizer or derive from *its* categories. Yet the appropriation of H-Blocks fragments into usable political narratives of cultural nationalism, i.e., their redeployment as appeals to the Other, are constant and largely beyond the ability of the H-Block dwellers to correct.

Hence the Hunger Strikes are continually framed and re-written as spectacles of martyrdom, described in terms of (paradoxical) self-indulgence by critics and part of a lineage of heroism, or Pearsean blood-sacrifice, by supporters. David Lloyd has referred to this relentless discourse, which actually differs very little depending on the affiliations of the speaker, as the ‘myth of myth’.<sup>370</sup> The American journalist, Padraig O’Malley writes, ‘Faced with the unacceptable realities of the present and the comforting allure of myth, they chose myth, to imagine them-selves “as sacrificial heroes taken from the old mythologies of torn gods”. . . . When all options closed, they took refuge in romantic stereotype’.<sup>371</sup> O’Malley characterises the strikers as having their ‘eyes fixed on a star in a galaxy of patriot-ghosts imploding in their imaginations, their bodies sacrificial offerings to the glutinous gods of a degenerative nationalism’.<sup>372</sup> Lloyd has shown how even more sophisticated commentators, such as Allen Feldman and Maud Ellmann, still have a tendency to accept the vocabulary of mythology and sacrifice at face value and to subtly reproduce it.

This is partly due to a vigorously disseminated Christology on the outside. O’Malley’s obvious contempt, in other words, is merely the obverse of the tendency to sanctify or canonise Bobby Sands. After his death (and only then) Sands would be popularly depicted as a lost young man, one who fell victim to the accumulated indignities of British misrule, Catholic discrimination, and the brutality of the H-Block prison system. While this characterisation is not inaccurate, it performs the function of ‘humanising’ him, such that Sands’ Christ-like sacrifice—his slow and painful death—can pay a spiritual ransom, as it were, so that the taint of terrorism can be burnt off. In his *Transitions*, Richard Kearney argues as much when he writes, ‘It is certainly this sacrificial logic of martyrdom which operated in the minds of the nationalist community when Bobby Sands and his nine fellow hunger-strikers were transformed, in the popular perception, from “delinquent criminals” to “national heroes”’.<sup>373</sup>

Yet such self-aggrandisement was dramatically absent from Sands’ vision. Still, interpretations such as Kearney’s accomplish a large amount of ideological labour. Glory and hagiography are simpler, more mobile, more emotive, more adequate to meme-making, and thus more effective in mobilising an anti-colonial (representational) politics. They ‘absolve’ the strikers from the repulsive, incomprehensible behaviour attached to the Dirty Protest, and effectively erase those previous five years of struggle. They successfully overstate the *personal* nature of the Hunger Strikes. While the anguish following Sands’ death is genuine, so is it more than a little tinged with relief. ‘Bobby Sands,’ the sensitive patriot, is identifiable and claimable in a way that the long season of the ‘animal’ (the life lived in darkness, prolonged nudity, and chronic proximity to excrement) could not be. All this horror is nullified in the starvation process, so that Sands’ exit can be, is indeed, a resplendent

<sup>370</sup> David Lloyd, ‘The Myth of Myth’, in *Hunger Strike: Reflections on the 1981 Hunger Strike* (Dingle, Co. Kerry, Ireland: Brandon, 2006).

<sup>371</sup> Padraig O’Malley, *Biting at the Grave: the Irish Hunger Strikes and the Politics of Despair* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1991) 113.

<sup>372</sup> O’Malley, *Biting at the Grave*, 6.

<sup>373</sup> Richard Kearney, *Transitions: Narratives in Modern Irish Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), 234.

one. Starvation is the only one of the somatic praxes in the H-Blocks to constitute a *mastery over* the body, and not a seeming descent into its animal functions. The Hunger Strikes eclipse everything else because they lend themselves to being read as a muscular overcoming.

Far from being ‘stage-managed by the IRA’ as Ellmann puts it, the H-Blocks struggles are carried out in direct defiance of the IRA leadership. One inmate notes the ‘strong opposition’ that came from the movement outside, “Simply because hunger strikes unleash forces you can’t control, not to the same extent as violence . . . . The outside was scared to make the logical extension of the struggle we were in’.<sup>374</sup> The strikes go ahead, of course, despite the fact that they are expressly against the directives of the hierarchy, which made an eleventh-hour attempt to stop them from going forward. The following smuggled ‘comm’ survives from that exchange:

*31.1.81 To Army Council*

*Comrade, we received your comm (dated 30.1.81). We have listened carefully to what you have said and accept the spirit in which it was wrote, likewise in view of the situation we do not deny you or criticize your extreme cautiousness. But, however, distressing it may be, we regret that our decision to hunger strike remains the same and we reconfirm the decision now with the same vigour and determination. . . . We accept the tragic consequences that most certainly await us and the overshadowing fact that death may not secure a principled settlement. . . . We reconfirm and pledge ‘our’ full confidence and support to you and march on with you to the Irish Socialist Republic.<sup>375</sup>*

The IRA outside the prison was afraid that the hunger strikes would indeed spark revolutionary violence but worried that they would not have the manpower to direct or control it. Bernadette Devlin made a public announcement in which she beseeched the nationalist community to refrain from violence following the death of Bobby Sands. The leadership outside remained unconvinced about the H-Block vision, Sinn Féin ignored the hunger strike in the early going, and the IRA did its best to stop it. It is thus difficult to reconcile the scene at Long Kesh with prevalent claims about an almost cultish martyrology that purportedly took over the Republican community in the H-Blocks, a martyrology that was sanctioned and encouraged by the outside leadership as the fulfilment of historical continuity. If anything, the H-Blocks struggles constituted a *rupture* with historical continuity, not its mythic culmination.

Melancholy is not the same as martyrdom. This becomes clear if we examine the way in which the Strikers were chosen. Those with physical ailments or lingering injuries were eliminated. Those who had gone off the Blanket or Dirty protests were also eliminated.<sup>376</sup> Those who might have been especially vulnerable to family pressures or pressures from the clergy were eliminated. That is to say, men who would not have been subject to unusual physical deterioration, who had shown the ability to persevere under extreme duress, and who would have had no special susceptibility to emotional intervention—these were the inmates who could volunteer their names. O’Malley argues that the strikers see themselves as ‘the chosen few, the elite of the elite’,<sup>377</sup> but self-valorisation is opposite to the ethos of H-Blocks collectivism. Death ceases to be unthinkable once it is no longer a solitary ordeal, but may be endured as a collective undertaking. One inmate said:

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<sup>374</sup> Feldman, *Formations of Violence*, 231.

<sup>375</sup> Quoted in David Beresford, *Ten Men Dead: The Story of the 1981 Irish Hunger Strikes* (Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1997), 38.

<sup>376</sup> Feldman, *Formations of Violence*, 241.

<sup>377</sup> O’Malley, *Biting at the Grave*, 5.

I started to think about dying, and I didn't know what good it would do if I came to that point. I would try to tell myself that I would be able to die, and then I wasn't sure. I kept putting off the decision. . . . About a week and a half later a note came down through the cells . . . The note was the list for the Hunger Strike. The cell below us, both of them put their names down. The note came to us and my cell mate put his name down. We had been together a long time. And then it came to me, and I knew at that moment that I could die if they were willing to.<sup>378</sup>

The embrace of caducity, according to Agamben, is what Benjamin meant when he spoke of messianic weakness. In fact, Agamben argues that as opposed to Paul, who found the caducity inherent to life painful and groaning, Benjamin believed that extreme caducity—messianic weakness—was the 'rhythm of happiness itself'.<sup>379</sup> Agamben draws attention to the unusual typography in Benjamin's famous words from the *Theses*, in which Benjamin writes, 'In the voices we hear, isn't there an echo of now silent ones? . . . If so, then there is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one. Then our coming was expected on earth. Then, like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a w e a k messianic power, a power on which the past has a claim. Such a claim cannot be settled cheaply. The historical materialist is aware of this'.<sup>380</sup> Why is weak spaced in this way?<sup>381</sup> Agamben argues so that it will be read twice, it will be 'hyperread'.<sup>382</sup>

The historical materialist cannot assume the point of view of the victor, but of *the least*, if she is to trace the 'secret index' of the past in the hope of redemption. 'W e a k' refers to just how weak one must be in order to deactivate the law. The H-Blocks protesters—surrounded by their own excrement, naked, speaking a 'debased' Irish and finally starving to death—construct an entire existential edifice built on (messianic) weakness. In the H-Blocks, they deactivate the law. It is the strikers who determine what happens next. 'Just as messianic power is realised and acts in the form of weakness, so too in this way does it have an effect on the sphere of law and its works, not simply by negating or annihilating them, but by de-activating them, rendering them inoperative, no-longer-at-work'.<sup>383</sup>

Just as Coetzee's Friday confounds the procedures of the law by not speaking, so do the protesters make the law inexecutable, in part by withdrawing their consent from being so governed. In the previous chapter, I argued that the H-Blocks struggle had amounted to an effectuation of the Lacanian 'passage to the act'—that is, a disturbance of the Symbolic order so extreme that its actors could not be said to be 'communicating' with the Other at all. Instead the inmates had 'left the scene'. Lacan endows his 'leaving the scene' with an appropriate spatial dimension: he likens the Symbolic to a theatre stage, complete with a 'proscenium arch', upon which subjects perform for the big Other. The 'passage to the act' involves removing oneself from the stage; it is a certain walking off the edge of its borders into the unknown. The usual markers of 'civilisation', such as calendrical time, are replaced by signs such as the weather, and the sense of lived time loses its metaphysical appurtenance in the H-Blocks: 'I could isolate exact days by the weather but not by the calendar. I do remember a meeting or a discussion taking place because of the weather that day. The only thing

<sup>378</sup> Feldman, *Formations of Violence*, 241.

<sup>379</sup> Agamben, *Time that Remains*, 141.

<sup>380</sup> Benjamin 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', 245-6.

<sup>381</sup> Agamben conjectures that Benjamin, when he was composing the *Theses*, had before him the Pauline text of 2 Corinthians 12: 9-10 which states: 'I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distress for the sake of the Messiah: for when I am weak, then I am strong [*denatos*].' Agamben writes, 'You can imagine that I was moved (to quite a degree) when discovering this hidden (although not so hidden) Pauline citation in the text within the *Theses*'. *Time that Remains*, 140.

<sup>382</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

<sup>383</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.



we used as stages and times was the stages of the protest. There was nothing else that meant fuck all. Days were measured on meals. Weeks were measured on fuck all'.<sup>384</sup> Recall Benjamin's point that in the French Revolution, the first things to be fired on were the clocks.<sup>385</sup>

The no-place where one arrives after having 'left the scene', that is, the liminal 'space,' outside the Symbolic order prompts Feldman to refer again and again to the Blanketmen as surviving variously as 'anomalous entities'<sup>386</sup> and 'unresolved initiates'.<sup>387</sup> This spatial dislocation converges aptly with a disordered temporality and with the temporal aspects of waiting. Intermittency may well be the characteristic feature of a community with a messianic vocation, the "community of in-between".<sup>388</sup> Hence Feldman remarks, '... the issue of time, its suspension and reactivation, became for them the lever upon which the mechanism of political action depended'.<sup>389</sup>

#### iv.

It has been argued that the protesters decided to embark on Hunger Strike because the Blanket and Dirty Protests were 'going nowhere'.<sup>390</sup> Immersion in excrement had not achieved the 'political status' the Hunger Strikers had sought, so they were forced to shift direction to the representational strategy of Hunger Striking. David Lloyd lays out the ways in which the Hunger Strikes succeeded in restoring a representational function to political efforts in Northern Ireland while paving the way for the meteoric rise of Sinn Féin and ultimately the peace process. Lloyd writes, 'In a certain sense, the very suspension of the blanket protests and the move to the representative structures of the hunger strike already entailed a reorientation of the struggle away from the possibility of an alternative conception of community . . . and towards a re-engagement with the rhetorical as well as the institutional structures of the state'.<sup>391</sup> Lloyd rightly rejects the general consensus that the Hunger Strikes were further propelled by the need to perform a self-validating spectacle of martyrdom. Yet I would argue that the shift to Hunger Striking comprised not a turning away from the being-in-common that was cultivated in the H-Blocks but a means to disseminate it outside the prison walls. The Hunger Strike should not be thought of as a break from what preceded it or a reversal of strategy. Rather it was a matter—so common with the 'messianic' community—of the *already us* but *not yet* them. Agamben speaks of the 'paradoxical tension' of the distance between the 'already' and the 'not yet' characteristic of the messianic. Those with the messianic vocation—or in Freudian terms, the melancholy imperative—have already effected the rupture with 'empty, homogenous time'; have already consolidated the being-in-common; have already effected the

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<sup>384</sup> Quoted in Feldman, *Formations of Violence*, 228.

<sup>385</sup> He writes, 'On the first evening of fighting it turned out that the clocks in towers were being fired on simultaneously and independently from several places in Paris'. Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', 253.

<sup>386</sup> Feldman, *Formations of Violence*, 227.

<sup>387</sup> *Ibid.*, 228.

<sup>388</sup> Agamben references a messianic community as existing 'between two times': 'As a consequence, this community understands its present as a very particular kind of 'between'. . . .Rabbinic theory holds that the messianic kingdom is situated between the old and new eons'. *Time that Remains*, 72.

<sup>389</sup> Feldman, *Formations of Violence*, 229.

<sup>390</sup> See his chapter of the same name, "'Going nowhere": oral space in the cell block' in *Irish Culture and Colonial Modernity: the Transformation of Oral Space* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 116-166.

<sup>391</sup> Lloyd, *Irish Culture and Colonial Modernity*, 156.

‘subjective destitution’ constitutive of the ‘passage to the act’; have already begun to reclaim the least. But all of this remains incomplete insofar as it is ‘just us’ but *not yet* them.

Agamben writes, ‘The messianic event has already happened. . . . but, nevertheless, in order to truly be fulfilled, this implies an additional time. How should we interpret this unusual scission, since it seems to introduce a constitutive delay or deferment into the messianic?’<sup>392</sup> The inmates seem to be in an experiential state that is almost absent of time or voided of it, and this poses a danger. In a political life of deferment, of waiting and suspension, of ‘transitional time’, the risk persists in which, ‘as with every transition, it tends to be prolonged into infinity and renders unreachable the end that it supposedly produces’.<sup>393</sup> After five years on the Blanket and Dirty protests, the H-Block men are all too conscious of the potential to slide into a kind of infinite holding pattern wherein the outside communities can never quite ‘catch up’. How to hasten this transitional time? The urgency is heightened through an awareness of Agamben’s risk of unreachability, but perhaps more so from the risk that Badiou will describe as the awful propensity (he calls it ‘evil’) of the militant to forget, to drift away from, and ultimately to disavow, her own militancy.<sup>394</sup>

They intensify their Irish. All the ‘non-conforming’ prisoners engage in the ‘lessons’ shouted from cell to cell. But those who put themselves forward for Hunger Strike undertake intensive educational immersions: ‘The Gaelic was going to be the basis for politicizing the wings and preparing them for the Hunger Strike’.<sup>395</sup> Another time opens when Irish is the living language. Irish-speaking creates a disjunction in time and exploits it, just as autophagy does. Hungering becomes the way to compress the spatial and temporal gap between inmate, ‘enslaved ancestor’ and support community. Hungering wards off the encroachment of both types of risk (Agamben’s and Badiou’s), and it bridges the ontological gap between the already us but not yet them. Immersion in (corrupted) Irish was held forth as a precursor to starvation, a means to prepare the hunger striker to accept his death. And why expend the last of one’s time in this way, learning Irish, if not to ‘commune’ with the least? It is almost as if the striker must become *Gaelgeoir* in order to starve the right way. The Hunger Striker became *flíocha* in Irish, fluent, in order to die.

The Hunger Strikes are not a break with the logic of the Dirty Protest; the ‘excremental position’ is wholly consistent with Benjamin’s weakness. The messianic is here a secularised understanding of restorative revolution, not, as in more dominant tropes, a theological visitation. The emphasis on (historical, eschatological) time repeatedly emerges in the oral histories. The starving body in the H-Block provokes a disordering of the past, present and future. But it is also an action meant to double these temporal displacements by catalysing the shift into messianic time. Messianic time is not, in Agamben’s words, ‘another day, homogenous to others; rather, it is that innermost disjointedness within time through which one may –by a hairsbreadth—grasp time and accomplish it’.<sup>396</sup>

Hungering succeeds in abbreviating the prison sentence as well, because it shifts the striker out of disciplinary time into what Feldman calls ‘biological time’. The wasting of the organism is comparatively quick; the shift amounts to the condensation of a single life into a span of not eighty-some years, but along the order of sixty days. One inmate says, ‘We had broken that sense of “the never ending”. You were very conscious then

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<sup>392</sup> Agamben, *Time that Remains*, 70.

<sup>393</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>394</sup> See Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. Peter Hallward (London: Verso, 2002).

<sup>395</sup> Quoted in Feldman, *Formations of Violence*, 222.

<sup>396</sup> Agamben, *Time that Remains*, 72.

that every day that went past was bringing the day of reckoning closer. There was that much happening and a new sense of urgency that set in all around'.<sup>397</sup>

Hunger striking 'buys up time'.<sup>398</sup> It is to cause time to 'contract itself and begin to end'.<sup>399</sup> Hunger Striking converts regular *chronos* and penal time into messianic time, because it is an acceleration—'a vertiginous abbreviation'<sup>400</sup>—of time. Autophagy too is appropriately time-dependent. Each day without food becomes a freighted step closer to death and one has, of course, only so many days. As one inmate says, 'During the Hunger Strike you were very very conscious of time. You knew that each day that went in was [. . .] another day somebody was closer to death.'<sup>401</sup> Each day is made to carry unusual weight in this time of the rapid deterioration of the body. Bobby Sands goes from, by all accounts, an intense and 'chubby' young man to a wasted corpse within a space of just over two months.

The description of a woman in the midst of advanced autophagy is one of many thousands of such stories: She is 'a little woman', foraging in 'the dunghill where she had been found searching out and eating juices of potato peel thrown out there . . . . You couldn't tell was she young or old as her face, which had lost all its natural colour, was wrinkled and puckered and covered with a white downy hair'.<sup>402</sup> The confusion of youth and decrepitude happens during the Famine and is repeated in Long Kesh. When Bobby Sands is in his last days, he is less mobile than the woman from Tullaghan (Co. Leitrim) but he is similarly disfigured by starvation and impending death. A visitor describes him thus: 'His left eye was black and closed, the right eye nearly closed and his mouth twisted as if he had suffered a stroke. He had no feeling in his legs and could only whisper. Every now and then he started dry retching . . . [He said,] "I'm blind. I can't see you"'.<sup>403</sup> The deterioration of sight means the body is likely feeding off brain protein.<sup>404</sup>

At this point in time, Bobby Sands more closely resembles the woman from Tullaghan than anyone around him. He is more like her than like himself a year earlier. Agamben says that it is to the same extent that one becomes the 'no longer I,' that the Messiah 'lives in him.' Hence each attempt to reinstall Bobby Sands as the 'I' of the Hunger Strikes further misapprehends his melancholy purpose, which is also in keeping with the desire to impute Christology. In starvation, Bobby Sands removes all predicates that could cohere to form an 'I' as well as those which would distinguish him from the Tullaghan woman or any other body which so suffered. Far from sanctifying or consolidating the 'I', Bobby Sands reverses it—he effects a reversal of the *cogito*. It is perhaps understandable why a resolute cultural nationalism would find these moves discomfiting. Instead of reifying 'Irish', 'Catholic' or 'nationalist', he has, in effect, dispensed with them all. He has hollowed out predication to make way for a traversal of the 'I' by the 'silent golem'<sup>405</sup> of the past and in so doing, assumed the excremental position instead of that which perpetuates high tradition.

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<sup>397</sup> Feldman, *Formations of Violence*, 247.

<sup>398</sup> According to Agamben, 'Paul twice uses the expression *ton kairon exagorazomenoi*, "buying up time" to convey the temporal condition of messianic time'. *Time that Remains*, 68.

<sup>399</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>400</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>401</sup> Feldman, *Formations of Violence*, 248.

<sup>402</sup> *Famine Echoes*, 97.

<sup>403</sup> Quoted in Beresford, *Ten Men Dead*.

<sup>404</sup> Feldman, *Formations of Violence*, 301.

<sup>405</sup> Agamben writes, 'The alternatives at this juncture are therefore not to forget or remember, to be unaware or become conscious, but rather, the determining factor is the capacity to remain faithful to that which having perpetually been forgotten, must remain unforgettable. It demands to remain with us and be possible for us in some manner [. . .]. The mass of the forgotten . . . accompanies us like a silent golem'. *Time that Remains*, 40-1.

Starvation is the means, then, not only to overburden time but also to exploit its disordering so as to ‘re-collect’ the Famine victims. Benjamin writes, ‘Each now is the now of a particular knowability. In it, truth is *charged to the bursting point with time*.’<sup>406</sup> Likewise the starving body expresses a central aspect of messianic time—‘recapitulation’—or the summary re-telling of a complete but radically condensed history. Coetzee’s Friday is also a ‘recapitulation’: he encapsulates the racial-displacements, mutilations, forced labour, and ‘muteness’ of the slave. Written on his body is the entire global history of European colonial-capitalism and the exploitation of indigenous peoples. On the Hunger Striker’s and Famine victim’s body is inscribed the intrusion of the conquerer, the introduction of exchange entitlements, the destruction of cultural resources, silence upon the lips where once there had been Irish, and ultimately autophagy unto death. Such recapitulations *tell* in highly compressed and intense displays. The appearance of the recapitulated body outside the prison will serve to create an indomitable *rushing* of the past into the present. Agamben likens recapitulation to ‘the panoramic vision that the dying supposedly have of their lives, when the whole of their existence passes before their eyes in a flash’—yet this panorama is of suffering, catastrophe and trauma, a history of colonial violence rendered and re-activated in a concentrated form. It is the instantaneous recall of the horror of centuries. It is no wonder that the strikers assumed there would be eruptions of mass violence on the outside.<sup>407</sup> Eschatology—messianism—is not oriented toward the future, as is commonly believed. Instead ‘recapitulation’ means a ‘contraction of past and present, [in which] we will have to settle our debts, at the decisive moment, first and foremost with the past’.<sup>408</sup>

v.

Marcia Cavell writes, ‘It is mourning that instructs one in the separateness of other persons, in the agency of the self, and in the finality of death’.<sup>409</sup> As opposed to mourners, then, the inmates maintain the primacy of sociation over separation, of the (revolutionary) impotence of the solitary subject, and a faith in the retrievability of the dead. Mourning relegates trauma to the past and obscures the knowledge of its real effects on the present, though it is likely to acquire a statist imprimatur. Famine commemoration, for example, proceeds from that place in which ‘no aspect of the loss is unconscious’. The state provides a name (The Great Famine); a body count (one million dead); depopulation figures (another million exiled) and cathartic ceremonies on appropriate anniversaries.

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<sup>406</sup> Benjamin, quoted in Agamben, *Time the Remains*, 145.

<sup>407</sup> Feldman explains, ‘They fully expected a coupling of this act of self-directed violence with mass insurrectionary violence outside the prison. These two forms of violence were seen as semantically and ethically continuous. Thus, despite its surface similarity to the nonviolent and pacifist protests associated with Ghandi and Martin Luther King, the Hunger Strike in the H-Blocks was not a pacifist or religious action. For the Blanketmen, the 1981 Hunger Strike involved none of the moral superiority or obligations of a turn away from violence. It was to be a prelude to violence’. *Formations of Violence*, 220. An inmate adds, ‘Sands envisioned that the Republican movement as a whole should be very much involved in all types of community work so that people could see that the IRA wasn’t just interested in bombing and shooting. Yet he said to some extent there was a need for the violence, because there was no way they could overthrow the capitalist system without the use of force . . . that America and the European community would never allow a left-wing socialist Ireland on their door-steps’. *Ibid.*, 224.

<sup>408</sup> Agamben, *Time that Remains*, 78.

<sup>409</sup> Cavell, ‘Keeping Time’. Likewise, ‘Freud endeavours to characterise the melancholic’s sustained devotion to the lost object as not only pathological but also antithetical to the ego’s well-being, indeed, its continued survival’. Eng and Kazanjian, ‘Introduction: Mourning Remains’, 3.

Remembering outside the confines of the ‘officially sanctioned’ occasion arouses suspicion. Even remembering outside the usual framework is threatening. Luke Gibbons recounts an episode in 1995 when an anonymous protester greeted the erection of a golden statue of Queen Victoria on the grounds of University College Cork with the words: ‘*What about the Famine?*’ This ‘nationalist crank’ was arrested.<sup>410</sup> The melancholic who cannot move on—the one for whom the dead continue to figure in the present, to haunt and destabilise it, and to lay a claim upon the living—will appear to be, for all intents and purposes, pathological. But if to ‘see reason’ means to accept the violence against the (Famine) dead on which one’s present reality is constructed—indeed, if it is to benefit from and even build upon that violent foundation—then ‘melancholy’ becomes less an affliction than a fidelity to the least that mourning them would betray. As David Lloyd has suggested, ‘Every act of historical violence has sought to destroy less life itself than the unruly, hopeful imagination of a future in which that life is lived otherwise’.<sup>411</sup> Mourning is consigning the past to archival, statist memory. Hungering for all that is *unknowably* lost is undeniably melancholic. Mournful is the official preservation of a language, while melancholy is to speak it.

Repetition of starvation is a means to reclaim the Famine dead from historicist oblivion. To repeat starvation is to take on the colonial-capitalist logic which ‘judged the dead dispensable’,<sup>412</sup> to make its violence visible and to bear it as one’s own, indeed to inscribe its very signature across one’s body. What stronger way to recuperate the dead than by effecting a ‘transubstantiation’ of those who so hungered? What more eloquent memorial than to lament the least not by committing them to memory, for memory is ever shifting and unreliable—but rather to assume their ontology and thereby enact their rise? In other words, there is no more direct way to remember than to *become the one who starves*.

Despite the best efforts of the H-Blocks inmates, the Benjaminian spark is not ignited. The appointed violence does not come. The sorrow was immense the night Bobby Sands died, but apart from rioting around Belfast and scattered parts of Northern Ireland, the ‘expected cathartic upsurge of popular and violent revolt’ did not materialise.<sup>413</sup> A Christological conservatism would swiftly displace any messianic residue that remained from the H-Blocks rupture and determine the tenor of representational politics in Northern Ireland up to the present time. Seamus Deane writes, ‘The point of crisis was passed without anyone seeming to know why the explosion did not come’.<sup>414</sup> As Badiou says truth is borne in weakness. Vulnerable, it must be carried as in a delicate earthenware vessel. Another sense in which messianic power is weak is that it is fragile, evanescent, and it will disappear again if it is not seized.

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<sup>410</sup> Luke Gibbons, *Transformations in Irish Culture* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press in association with Field Day, 1996), 171.

<sup>411</sup> Lloyd, *Irish Times*, 40.

<sup>412</sup> Ibid.

<sup>413</sup> Feldman, *Formations of Violence*, 247.

<sup>414</sup> Deane, ‘Civilians and Barbarians’, in *Ireland’s field day: Field Day Theatre Company* (London: Hutchinson, 1985), 14.

## 6. Conquest and Signs; or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love English

### i.

Jean-Francois Lyotard opens his book, *The Differend*, with the following words: ‘You are informed that human beings endowed with language were placed in a situation such that none of them is now able to tell about it. Most of them disappeared then, and the survivors rarely speak about it. When they do speak about it, their testimony bears only upon a minute part of the situation. How do you know that the situation itself existed? That it is not the fruit of your informant’s imagination?’<sup>415</sup>

A state such as this—in which damage has occurred, but the afflicted are either dead or not ‘now able to tell about it’—reflects what Lyotard calls the differend. The differend is that state of affairs in which catastrophe cannot be told because there is no available idiom in which to do so. A survivor would be compelled to state what it was that she had lost if she could ever hope to establish grounds for redress, or to explain the violation, or to attest that there had been a violation at all. But what has been lost—damaged in the trauma itself—is in part the very discourse genre in which her words would have meaning and her telling, significance. That discourse genre has been discredited, wiped out; it may no longer even have other speakers. What has been lost, therefore, is incalculable, because unsayable. It can only register in the new discourse genre—the victorious one—as inarticulate groaning. When the survivor tries to utter her loss in the new discourse genre, it comes out as the simpering of a victim-language. Hysteria, enfeeblement, unreality—these characteristics accrue to the victim who tries to speak in the idiom that overwhelmed her own, until she becomes disinclined to speak of the trauma at all. Hence ‘the survivors rarely speak about it’. Because her discourse genre has been erased, she lacks the means to convey that it ever existed in the first place. It is effectively as if, Lyotard suggests, this loss—because unsayable and thus impossible to prove—did not happen at all. This erasure is perhaps the most effective strategy of them all in the repertoire of the colonial-capitalist discourse genre.

A discourse genre is a ‘means of presenting a universe’. A discourse genre *includes* language(s) but is not identical to it. Rather a discourse genre encompasses many other things besides—including behaviours and dispositions, for example, and strategies—what Lyotard calls ‘stakes and interests’. What is at stake in a certain discourse genre defines its parameters and its borders, because what is at stake in one discourse genre will not be the same as in another. Discourse genres are incommensurable by definition. Lyotard’s incommensurability thesis differs from the related theses of Whorf (linguistic relativity), or Kuhn (the incommensurability of scientific paradigms), or even Quine (ontological relativity), in that Lyotard stresses the political complications of the incommensurability of discourse genres by situating them within a field of power relations. As opposed to Whorf, for example, a genre of discourse is not simply a cast of mind and an orientation to reality as constructed by one’s native language. Neither does it retain the rather neutral valence of the ‘language games’ thesis that Lyotard borrowed from Wittgenstein and deployed in the *Postmodern Condition*. In a language game, one can ‘move’ well or one can ‘move’ poorly toward her end, which is ‘winning’. She can ‘throw the game’ but this too is a means of playing in a directed manner. In *The Differend*, Lyotard emphasises the conflictual aspects inherent to the encounter between incommensurable discourse genres. The global ‘success’ of the imperial (or colonial-capitalist) discourse genre is partly a function of its remarkable skill at engorging, debilitating and even

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<sup>415</sup> Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press), 3.

eradicating other discourse genres. That is, its success resides in its ability to maintain the elaborate and violent fiction that there are not discourse genres plural, but only *one*, which is itself.<sup>416</sup> (Or none, for that amounts to the same thing.)

The differend is defined as the incommensurability between idioms or discourse genres which cannot be spoken but which signals grievance, discord and trauma. The differend exists because there is no transcendent third discourse genre which could mediate or arbitrate between two discourse genres in conflict, and the differend is this lack. In the absence of a third genre, judgment will have to issue forth from one set of stakes and interests and thus necessarily wrong the other: 'A wrong results from the fact that the rules of the genre of discourse by which one judges are not those of the judged genre or genres of discourse'.

The 'survivor who rarely speaks about it' will be tempted, it would seem, to expand her grasp of the new discourse genre, the victor-idiom, to ensure both fluency and eloquence—imagining in this way that she could become good enough to surpass the taint of victim-language, to accede to a level of semantic prowess such that even the 'owners' of the discourse genre will be forced to yield and to listen. She will rhetorically arrange the truth in such a way that the victor cannot avoid it. She will, as it has been said, master the coloniser's language and 'write back'. But something else, something unexpected, happens in this process. We can see it happen in almost every post/colony. As soon as she adopts a discourse genre, so must she necessarily adopt the stakes and interests of that discourse genre as her own. If she did not, her speech acts could not coalesce and her truth could not be comprehended. (Either that or she will be accused of 'simpering'). She must use the basic coordinates of the adopted genre—*its* grid of intelligibility and not her own—or else she cannot produce a meaningful utterance. But those same stakes and interests—the ones to which she is now committed, if indeed she wants to speak—are the very ones entangled with the catastrophe to which she ostensibly bears witness. She has to reform her speech acts in accordance with the discourse genre with which she intends to 'write back', and yet the moment she truly *accepts* those stakes and interests as her own is the moment at which she can no longer speak of the trauma without neutralising it. It is the moment at which the trauma dissipates into an unpleasant but necessary turn of events on the way to modern progress.

This is partly because if she can speak of it, i.e., phrase it in litigious language which can be brought before 'a tribunal competent to hear it', then it becomes 'litigation' rather than differend. 'Litigation' can be cognised within the new discourse genre whereas differend cannot. If it could be satisfactorily addressed, perhaps even remedied or resolved, according to the dictates of the new discourse genre, then it would be litigation and not differend. Differend is that which exceeds litigation. The plaintiff must reduce her claims to speakable concerns which are subject to judicial pronouncement. Lyotard thus speaks of 'smothering' the differend into litigation, of 'neutralising' and 'repressing' differends in this way.

Consider this example from a remote area of post-Famine Ireland. A man (Myles Joyce of Maamtrasna) is accused of a serious crime and must appear before an Anglophone court. He speaks only Irish. He is granted an interpreter, who renders his 'intricate explanations' and appeals to heaven into 'dry'

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<sup>416</sup> One of the pretensions of the colonial-capitalist discourse genre is that it is 'supreme'. Lyotard writes, 'The idea that a supreme genre encompassing everything that's at stake could supply a supreme answer to the key-questions of the various genres founders upon Russell's aporia. Either this genre is part of a set of genres, and what is at stake in it is but one among others, and therefore its answer is not supreme. Or else, it is not part of the set of genres, and it does not therefore encompass all that is at stake, since it excepts what is at stake in itself. . . . *The principle of an absolute victory of one genre over the others has no sense.* Lyotard, *Differend*, 138; emphasis mine.

monosyllables ('He says no, your worship').<sup>417</sup> Each time the judge puts another question to him, the scenario is repeated. James Joyce, who records the incident for a newspaper with somewhat comic undertones, describes his namesake's agony thus: 'The old man was speaking once again, protesting, shouting, almost beside himself with the distress of not understanding or making himself understood, weeping with rage and terror.'<sup>418</sup> Still, 'he says no', is the extent of the translation. Joyce presents the trial as an analogy for Ireland's image of impotence upon the world stage; Ireland 'at the bar' of public opinion is ever consigned to the results of poor representation in both senses of the word (i.e., incompetent 'advocacy' as well as preconceived inferiority). Like Myles Joyce, Ireland suffers from 'inarticulacy'. Were Ireland to be given a fair hearing before the universal court of public opinion, Joyce believes, it would be absolved of much of its presumed backwardness. Likewise, had the old man had a more serious interpreter, had he had some command of English, had he not been overwhelmed by the pomp of civic rituals, then justice might well have been done.

Yet if we read the anguish of Myles Joyce, as James Joyce does, as a result of the indifference of the interpreter, the coldness of the magistrate, or even the brutality of the hangman ('Legend has it that even the hangman could not make himself understood by the victim and angrily kicked the unhappy man in the head to force him into the noose'<sup>419</sup>), then we have duplicated his error. One would have to accept justice so construed (as it is in the British court system) in order to formulate a complaint about its miscarriage. In granting his tacit assent to this notion of justice, Joyce confined him-self to critiquing not the notion, but the manner of its execution. Though it is made with sympathy, Joyce's error consists in confusing the imposition of the Law with an instance of its misapplication. The differend, meanwhile, persists in the rage and terror of Myles Joyce but remains unsayable in the context of the courtroom, because in order to speak of what the harm consisted, one would have to conform to the norms and lexica of one discourse genre over the other. Lyotard's point is that the old man's distress is not articulable (or even calculable) according to the dictates of a colonial court, because his 'rage and terror' are to do with *having been colonised*. And having been colonised is not a grievance that can be brought before a British court (or a post-independence Irish one, for that matter).<sup>420</sup>

It is true that Myles Joyce would likely have fared better if he had had a grasp of English. As an Anglophone subject, well-acquainted with the new discourse genre, he might just have saved himself from the noose. The imperative to acquire English (and forget Irish) would seem to be the post/colonial moral derived from stories such as this. Suppose that Myles Joyce could replay his court scene again, could return having become 'worldlier', with skilled representation and a working knowledge of English. He might be spared the death sentence this time, but so would he have done his part to entrench a discourse genre he knows (or knew) to be violent. And so would he help to repress the differend, to push knowledge of it further from view, to the farthest margins, where it is increasingly imperceptible, and more difficult to recognise for what it is.

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<sup>417</sup> James Joyce, 'Ireland at the Bar', in *Occasional, critical and political writing*, ed. Kevin Barry (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008): 145-148.

<sup>418</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

<sup>419</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>420</sup> Lyotard provides a similar example: 'A Martinican is a French citizen; he or she can bring a complaint against whatever impinges upon his or her rights as a French citizen. But the wrong he or she deems to suffer from *the fact of being a French citizen* is not a matter for litigation under French law. It might be under private or public international law, but for that to be the case it would be necessary that the Martinican were no longer a French citizen. But he or she is'. *Differend*, 27; emphasis mine.



Let us consider another example—far removed in time and space—but which further conveys the incommensurability of discourse genres, the ferocity of the differend, and the absence of an idiom with which to tell the catastrophe. It could be argued that talk of conflicting discourse genres is simply ‘linguistic’ and thus not really violent. Yet Tzvetan Todorov has convincingly argued that signs are capable of pulling down entire civilisations; he calls the conquest of the Americas a conquest of signs.

When the Aztecs enfolded the Spaniards into their genre of discourse, the latter became vengeful deities. When the Spaniards absorbed the Aztecs into their genre of discourse, they became so many (subhuman, dispensable) obstacles to the procurement of gold. The Aztecs associated gold with excrement; they had no universal equivalent (i.e., concept of money) for which gold would serve as a circulating metaphor. Cortés told Montezuma that his men ate this gold for its medicinal qualities, in order to explain this inexplicable obsession.<sup>421</sup> The Spaniards, meanwhile, prized gold so highly that they would do anything (dupe, massacre, etc.) in order to acquire it. The stakes and interests of the Spanish discourse genre (including the mission to procure gold and convert pagans) precluded Aztec ‘perseverance in being’. The success of one would be excluded by the success of the other, or as Lyotard writes, ‘There are stakes tied to genres of discourse. When these stakes are attained, we talk about success. There is conflict, therefore’.<sup>422</sup>

When one discourse genre begins to subsume and engulf another, then incommensurability has become differend. In *The Conquest of America: the question of the other*, Todorov attempts to articulate why the bold and magisterial Aztec empire was broken with such totality and swiftness by what amounted to a motley band of conquistadors. He writes, ‘A mystery concerning the very outcome of the combat still hovers over the conquest: why this lightninglike victory, when the inhabitants of America are so superior in number to their adversaries and fighting on their own territory as well? [ . . . ] How are we to account for the fact that Cortés, leading a few hundred men, managed to seize the kingdom of Montezuma, who commanded several hundred thousand?’<sup>423</sup> While acknowledging the more typical explanations—including the superiority of Spanish weaponry, the internecine strife amongst indigenous factions manipulated by Cortés, so-called ‘microbial shock’, and the enigmatic figure of Montezuma himself: too hesitant, philosophical or melancholy to resist<sup>424</sup>—Todorov argues that even when taken together, these factors cannot account for the sheer magnitude and velocity of civilizational undoing.

To say that the devastation of Montezuma’s empire at the hands of the Spaniards was a conquest of signs is of course not to say that the conceptual universe of the Aztecs was limited or simplistic and therefore

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<sup>421</sup> ‘Cortés, apparently, had offered this explanation: the Spaniards need gold as the cure for sickness. The Indians, who identify gold with excrement, find this difficult to accept. Money, as a universal equivalent, does not exist. . . . The entire Spanish power structure eludes them’. Tzvetan Todorov, *Conquest of America: the question of the other*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Harper and Row, 1984), 96.

<sup>422</sup> Lyotard, *Differend*, 137.

<sup>423</sup> Todorov, *Conquest of America*, 53.

<sup>424</sup> Todorov writes, ‘Unfortunately we lack the documents that might have permitted us to penetrate the mental world of this strange emperor: in the presence of his enemies he is reluctant to make use of his enormous power, as if he were not convinced he wished to conquer; as Gomara, Cortés’s chaplain and biographer, says: “Our Spaniards were never able to learn the truth, because at the time they did not understand the language, and afterward no one was found alive with whom Montezuma had shared the secret.” The Spanish historians of the period vainly sought the answer to these questions, seeing Montezuma sometimes as a madman, sometimes as a philosopher’. *Conquest of America*, 57.

easily overcome. Nor is it to suggest that language and the manipulation of signs was unimportant in Aztec culture. In fact Todorov demonstrates the opposite. The coming of the conquistadors and the subsequent widespread slaughter of the indigenes was, for the latter, epistemologically unaccountable,<sup>425</sup> what Todorov refers to as a ‘collision between a ritual world and a unique event’.<sup>426</sup> Indeed Montezuma’s failure was nothing if not a failure to ‘situate’ Cortés and his men.<sup>427</sup> And yet that is not the whole story. Despite the fact that the Aztecs are known for fearlessness and skill in battle, and despite the cultural importance placed on linguistic excellence and ornate symbolic systems, Montezuma increasingly becomes increasingly *fatalistic and mute*. For reasons too complex to elaborate here, Todorov shows how Aztec communicative strategies proved profoundly maladaptive to the task of doing battle with the Spaniards. As Aztec communication fell apart, so did their resistance, and they were massacred with relative ease. It is in signs, but just as importantly in their temporal organisation (and in their organisation of temporality)—i.e., in narrative, and in particular, the narrative of necessity—that Todorov locates his explanation. In an attempt to compute a series of events for which indigenous signs did not exist, the Aztecs ultimately provoke a kind of implosion of their own discourse genre. Todorov describes how the arrangement of signs and temporality result in epistemological collapse. In the survivor testimonies, he argues, certain narrative patterns emerge:

The [‘Indians’] invariably begin by the enumeration of the omens announcing the coming of the Spaniards. Moreover, Montezuma is apparently bombarded with messages that all predict the newcomers’ victory. . . . Taken together, these accounts, proceeding from peoples very remote from each other, are striking in their uniformity: the arrival of the Spaniards is always *preceded* by omens, their victory is *always* foretold as certain. Further, these omens are strangely alike, from one end of the American continent to the other. There is always a comet, a thunderbolt, a fire, two-headed men, persons speaking in a state of trance, etc.

Yet how is it possible to speak of epistemological ‘surprise’ or conceptual rupture if the coming of the Spaniards, or some other equally dark force, was already expected? And what of the idea that an unnameable malevolence was not simply on its way, but would always certainly prevail? It was destined to prevail because it had already arrived and was *already doing so*. Its being in the process of *occurring* was all the ‘proof’ required of the verity of the predictions. Hence prediction, that is *foreknowledge*, occurs not beforehand, according to Todorov, but after:

Even if we did not want to exclude the reality of these omens a priori, there is something about so many coincidences that should put us on our guard. Everything suggests that the omens were invented after the fact; but why? . . . Instead of perceiving this fact as a purely human if unprecedented encounter—the arrival of men greedy for gold and power—the Indians integrate it into a network of natural, social, and supernatural relations, in which the

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<sup>425</sup> Todorov writes, ‘The identity of the Spaniards is so different, their behaviour to such a degree unforeseeable, that the whole system of communication is upset, and the Aztecs no longer succeed precisely where they had previously excelled: in gathering information. If the Indians had known, Bernal Díaz writes on many occasions, “how few, how weak and exhausted we were at that time”. All the Spaniards’ actions take the Indians by surprise’. Todorov, *Conquest of America*, 73.

<sup>426</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>427</sup> Todorov writes, ‘From this collision between a ritual world and a unique event result’s Montezuma’s incapacity to produce appropriate and effective messages. Masters in the art of ritual discourse, the Indians are inadequate in a situation requiring improvisation, and this is precisely the situation of the conquest. Their verbal education favours paradigm over syntagm, code over context, conformity-to-order over efficacy-of-the-moment, the past over the present. Now, the Spanish invasion creates a radically new, entirely unprecedented situation, in which the art of improvisation matters more than that of ritual.’ *Ibid.*, 87.

event thereby loses its singularity: it is somehow domesticated, absorbed into an order of already existing beliefs. The Aztecs perceive the conquest—i.e., the defeat—and at the same time mentally overcome it by inscribing it within a history conceived according to their requirements (nor are they the only people to have done such a thing): the present becomes intelligible and at the same time less inadmissible, the moment one can see it already announced in the past. And the remedy is so well adapted to the situation that, hearing the narrative, everyone believes he remembers that the omens had indeed appeared *before* the conquest. But meanwhile, these prophecies exert a paralyzing effect on the Indians hearing them and further diminish their resistance'.<sup>428</sup>

The psychic resourcefulness of the strategy is evident: to 'domesticate' the horror, to absorb it into an order 'of already existing beliefs', to narratively mitigate its awful singularity, is to 'overcome' it. All of these efforts were perhaps necessary in order to have orientated oneself in the midst of chaos and mass death. And yet as a technique of survival, it will prove disastrous. This inherent paradox is noted hauntingly in the pages of the Mayan book of prophecy, *Chilam Balam*, when it is stated: 'Those who die are those who do not understand; those who live will understand it'.<sup>429</sup> Of the former there is Montezuma himself; Montezuma cannot 'understand' and this is equated both rhetorically and literally with (his) death. According to Aztec accounts, upon hearing word of the arrival of the Spanish marauders, 'Montezuma lowered his head, and without answering a word, placed his hand upon his mouth. In this way he remained for a long time. He appeared to be dead or mute, since he was unable to give any answer'.<sup>430</sup> Another account also depicts him with lowered head, stating, 'He remained in this attitude, and did not speak at all, but remained a long time full of affliction, as if he were beside himself'.<sup>431</sup>

Montezuma becomes catatonic just as Myles Joyce succumbs to weeping with rage and terror and both of them die, since 'those who die are those who do not understand'. Yet 'dying' and understanding may not be so appreciably different. Understanding would seem to have to do with both narrative and necessity. The Aztecs did not die because they 'believed' in their prophecies; as that would be to invert the sequence. The Aztecs did not die because they believed their fate inescapable—rather they believed it to be inescapable because they were dying. As the Aztecs are steadily overcome by the Spaniards, they proceed to posit a retroactive 'memory' of omens that encodes their deaths into a recognisable, pre-existing order and that thereby facilitates the 'admissibility' of those deaths. Perhaps what Montezuma glimpsed was not necessity but the arbitrary brutality of it all, and this was too unbearable—literally—to live with.

On the temporal sequencing implicit to narrative and the meaning-effect this instantiates, Robert Scholes writes, 'Only one kind of thing can be narrated: a time-thing, or to use our normal word for it, an "event". . . . Narrative is always presented as if the events came first, the text second, and the interpretation third, so that the interpretation, by striving toward a recreation of the events, in effect completes a semiotic circle. And in this process, the events themselves become humanised—saturated with meaning and value—at

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<sup>428</sup> Ibid., 74-5.

<sup>429</sup> Quoted in Todorov, *Conquest of America*, 77.

<sup>430</sup> Durán, III, quoted in Todorov, *Conquest of America*, 69.

<sup>431</sup> Florentine Codex, XII, quoted in Todorov, *Conquest of America*, 13. Todorov goes on: 'Montezuma is not simply alarmed by the content of the messages; he shows himself literally incapable of communicating, and the text establishes a significant parallel between "mute" and "dead". This paralysis does not merely weaken the gathering of information; it already symbolizes defeat, since the Aztec sovereign is above all a master of speech—the social action par excellence—and since the renunciation of language is the admission of failure'.

the stage of entextualisation and again at the stage of interpretation'.<sup>432</sup> To become saturated with meaning and value is in some sense to impute necessity, for could it even be possible to describe a discursive object as 'narrative' if it were meaningless and chaotic?<sup>433</sup> (It may have elements meant to signify 'meaninglessness' and 'chaos' but they are typically inscribed within a legible framework that serves to temper them. This is why Homi Bhabha's call to produce a migrant, literary knowledge of the 'schizoid and subversive'<sup>434</sup>—he gives the example of Salman Rushdie's work—may simply constitute one set of compositional and readerly cues or directives among many others.<sup>435</sup> The writer anticipates composing something 'schizoid and subversive' and the reader anticipates consuming it.) It would seem that narrative functions to contain meaninglessness and chaos, hence it occludes violence as a condition of its own inauguration.

This is Lacan's point, that the very form of narrative entails repressed violence.<sup>436</sup> Lacan argues that the narrative function itself is a means of obscuring an originary trauma. In part this works by manipulating temporality, as we have seen with the Aztecs, so that a certain recognisability is created out of that which is unrecognisable, i.e., chaotic, meaningless and violent. This is not the same thing as saying that words are inadequate to the horror they signify, or that our narratives cannot 'capture' the suffering of indigenous peoples. It is to say that narratives of necessity emerge as a means to reconcile and disavow such violence. Žižek explains, 'It is not only that some narratives are 'false': based upon the exclusion of traumatic events and patching up the gaps left by these exclusions—Lacan's thesis is much stronger: the answer to the question "Why do we tell stories?" is that *narrative as such* emerges in order to resolve some fundamental antagonism by

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<sup>432</sup> Robert Scholes, 'Language, Narrative, and Anti-Narrative', in *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (Autumn 1980), 210.

<sup>433</sup> Or as Paul Ricoeur provocatively puts it, 'Following a story, correlatively, is understanding the successive actions, thoughts, and feelings in question insofar as they present a certain directedness. By this I mean that we are pushed ahead by this development and that we reply to its impetus with expectations concerning the outcome and the completion of the entire process. In this sense, the story's conclusion is the pole of attraction of the entire development. But a narrative conclusion can be neither deduced nor predicted. There is no story if our attention is not moved along by a thousand contingencies. This is why a story has to be followed to its conclusion. So rather than being predictable, a conclusion must be acceptable. Looking back from the conclusion to the episodes leading up to it, we have to be able to say that this ending required these sorts of events and this chain of actions. But this backward look is made possible by the teleological movement directed by our expectations when we follow the story. This is the paradox of contingency, judged "acceptable after all", that characterises the comprehension of any story told'. Paul Ricoeur, 'Narrative Time', in *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (Autumn 1980), 174.

<sup>434</sup> See Homi K. Bhabha, 'DissemiNation: time, narrative, and the margins of the modern nation', in *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi K. Bhabha (London: Routledge, 1990): 291-322.

<sup>435</sup> Postmodern literature has long since made use of the sort of technique Bhabha promotes for producing migrant knowledge: poly-vocalism, multiple temporalities, stammers and elisions, ellipses, experimentations, episodic and halting structures, pastiche, and so on. These things in themselves do not necessarily produce migrant knowledge.

<sup>436</sup> By way of example, Žižek chronicles the 'origin myth' of the emergence of industrial capitalism. Capitalism is predicated, we tell ourselves, on the ingenuity, hard work and frugal habits of a proto-bourgeoisie, from whose ethos and determination it developed. Yet it is the actualities of the slave trade, the expropriations of foreign land and resources, and a globalised imperial brigandry which provides the 'real' basis on which capital is able to make its historical appearance as a mode of production. Our fantasy story—partly Weberian and partly Biblical—the one which relies on a split between the love of labour and the love of sloth, actually explains nothing, according to Žižek, because it 'already presupposes a worker behaving like a full-blown capitalist.' In other words, the '... narrative of the two workers, one lazy and free-spending, the other diligent and enterprising, accumulating and investing, provides the myth of the 'origins of capitalism', [while] obfuscating the violence of its actual genealogy.' *The Plague of Fantasies* (London: Verso, 2008), 11.

rearranging its terms into a temporal succession'.<sup>437</sup> To paraphrase Lyotard, the 'before' and 'after' of narrative time stabilises the otherwise radical unleashing of the 'now'.

The narrative of necessity within the colonial-capitalist discourse genre erases the evidence of its own contingency and violence. Aztec deaths are no longer senseless deaths, but as such neither do they retain any impetus for redress (neither litigation nor differend). Meaningful death is more palatable than meaningless death, but this very formulation of 'meaning' may well consign the dead to their fates. It is in this *ex post facto* ascription that trauma or violence is ameliorated (and arguably, in parallel fashion, that the conquerors are more or less exculpated) by the victims themselves. This mechanism of retroactive ascription permits all manner of violence to become, in Todorov's words, both domestic (recognisable) and integral (necessary), i.e., the Spaniards were only the incarnations of what was pre-ordained and announced by the omens. If such narrating is indeed 'understanding', it is also circular: 'The price one pays for the narrative resolution is the *petitio principii* of the temporal loop—the narrative silently presupposes as already given what it purports to reproduce'.<sup>438</sup> The Aztec narrative of conquest does not 'explain' the coming of the Spaniards so much as it 'accepts'—by way of a retroactive antecedent—the mass death which is already underway. This nascent paralysing effect is what Althusser sought to capture in his a/temporal concept of the 'toujours déjà'—'the always already'. *There is no antagonism* if this was always-already bound to happen; either because it was prophesied in the scriptures as with the collapse of the Aztecs, because God is punishing us for speaking Irish as with the Great Famine,<sup>439</sup> or because the progress of Man depends upon such ruthless modernisations. Althusser wrote, 'The peculiarity of ideology is that it is endowed with a structure and a functioning such as to make it a non-historical reality, in the sense in which that structure and functioning are *immutable*'.<sup>440</sup>

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Althusser's immutability is analogous to Bertolt Brecht on 'inexorable fate'. Brecht traces the preference for what he calls 'catharsis' all the way back to Aristotelian drama. Catharsis, he argues, turns on the presentation of an 'inexorable fate' to which the hero displays 'beautiful and significant reactions'. The spectator merges with the hero, identifies with him, and thereby undergoes a kind of 'spiritual cleansing' as he does so. As this 'fate' is by definition necessary ('inexorable') then all we can do is respond to it in the most beautiful way possible. There is an instructional quality to Aristotelian drama in that sense: 'The individual whose innermost being is thus driven into the open then of course comes to stand for Man with a capital M. Everyone (including the spectator) is then carried away by the momentum of the events portrayed, so that in a performance of Oedipus one has for all practical purposes an auditorium full of little Oedipuses, an auditorium

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<sup>437</sup> Ibid., 10-11; emphasis mine.

<sup>438</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>439</sup> David Lloyd writes, 'A recurrent assertion within studies that invoke popular memories and accounts of the Famine is that that catastrophe was most generally explained by its survivors as an act of God which punished the Irish peasantry, whether for the folly of continuing to speak Irish, the waste of potatoes in prior years of abundance, or other less commonly invoked sins'. *Irish Times: Temporalities of Modernity* (Dublin: Field Day in association with the Keough-Naughton Institute at the University of Notre Dame, 2008), 33. Just as Cortés utilised Aztec narrative to his advantage—for example encouraging the belief that he embodied the return of Quetzalcoatl or some other vengeful god—so did British officials themselves use the language of divine providence in relation to the Famine. Todorov, *Conquest of America*, 118.

<sup>440</sup> Louis Althusser, 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes towards an Investigation', in *Lenin and Philosophy and other essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001), 108; emphasis mine.

full of Emperor Joneses for a performance of *The Emperor Jones*'.<sup>441</sup> 'Gestus', on the contrary, attempts to demonstrate that this order of things is not necessary, but thoroughly contingent. Catharsis would consist of an experiential or *personal* resolution to trauma, displaying the interior oscillations of an individual hero, whereas 'gestus' is designed to display social relations, or constellations of social relations and the social laws that govern them. 'Gestus' seeks to interrupt the mesmeric effects of cathartic, 'cleansing' identifications. (That the Aztecs do not see the Spaniards as ordinary men 'greedy for gold and power' but as preternatural harbingers of death is the difference between one encoding and another. The latter encoding, however, ensures a prophetic self-fulfillment. The rewriting of reality-effects can have profound material consequences). This is why gestic theatre 'would at all costs avoid bundling together the events portrayed and presenting them as an inexorable fate, to which the human being is handed over helpless . . . on the contrary, it is precisely this fate that it would study closely, showing it up as of human contriving'.<sup>442</sup>

What is unbearable is that a people is exterminated for no other reason than that of arbitrary brutality. 'Catharsis' avoids a confrontation with this unseemly knowledge. As a result, it seems ever bound to euphemism: hence Chinua Achebe links the colonial project to a case of 'racial arrogance'. Achebe tacitly appeals to an 'inexorable fate' each time he pronounces on the state of English in Nigeria, e.g., 'These [African] languages will just have to develop as tributaries to feed the one central language enjoying nation-wide currency. Today, for good or ill, that language is English. Tomorrow it may be something else, although I very much doubt it'.<sup>443</sup> This does not differ greatly from the Aztec prophecy: We must die because we are dying. We must speak English because we are speaking it.

The post/colonial writer often reconciles herself to a certain 'cathartic' logic. She agrees to reduce her grievances to litigation in exchange for the maintenance of her 'voice'. Litigation becomes sufficient, especially inasmuch as it permits her voice to be heard. The survivor reasons that she must confine her complaints to litigation lest she do away with her 'only' obvious medium—her voice itself—and thus her means of expressing it. In fact she may come to believe that this 'identity', this 'voice', was really all that mattered to begin with, and that so long as her voice is protected and preserved, than *no violation* has taken place. Moreover, the English language can incorporate the pertinent features of her original discourse genre with minimal mutilations, she imagines, so long as the 'translation' is done with due care and sensitivity. Indeed there is a certain seductive promise of catharsis in the notion of identity. It is through 'identity', in other words, that the post/colonial narrator is permitted a personal 'resolution' to colonial violence and an opportunity to display the 'beauty and significance of [her] reactions' to adversity. *'Identity' purports, at least to some extent, to preserve the modes of social organisation its assumption makes impossible to resume.* There is no such thing as Irish 'identity' prior to the onset of modernity, because it does not have a function and has no occasion to arise. 'Identity' becomes a pressing need only when what it is meant to retrieve is already gone. (As Marx noted in *Capital*, 'Men made

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<sup>441</sup> Brecht begins to develop the theory of non-Aristotelian drama in his essay on the *Dreigroschenprozess*, 1930. See also Walter Benjamin, 'What is Epic Theatre?' in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zorn (London: Pimlico, 1999): 144-151.

<sup>442</sup> Elizabeth Wright explains, 'Brecht's theatre is an attempt at a social intervention, whereby the prevailing power structure must be felt to be intolerable and act as a trigger for the critical process of analysis, with both author and spectator equally involved in challenging the text'. *Postmodern Brecht: A Re-Presentation* (London: Routledge, 1989), 33.

<sup>443</sup> Chinua Achebe, 'The African Writer and the English Language', in *Morning Yet on Creation Day: Essays* (London: Heinemann, 1975), 57.

clothes for thousands of years, under the compulsion of the need for clothing, without a single man ever becoming a tailor’).<sup>444</sup>

Narratives of identity emerge in response to violence in a manner entirely consistent with Lacan’s thesis that narrative arises in response to repressed antagonism. Lacan reserved particular ire for the ‘ego psychology’ practices that dominated in America, in which assumptions about the restoration to wholeness that could be affected by language, self-knowledge, and narrative were the psychoanalytic order of the day. For Lacan, the subject has no wholeness to restore; rather it is constitutively fractured—split—and thus presumptions to restoring (narrative) unity should be cause for profound suspicion. The analyst who encourages the patient to build a new narrative of self—‘with all the traumas properly integrated’<sup>445</sup>—rather than help the patient realise that the illusion of (narrative) unity is itself the affliction, is fundamentally remiss. ‘Identity’ is bought at the price of chasing the differends to the margins, or as Lyotard puts it: ‘An “internal” peace is bought at the price of perpetual differends on the outskirts. (The same arrangement goes for the ego, that of self-identification)’. This is why Brecht rejected the entire edifice of cathartic drama.

Ngugi wa Thiong’o, the Kenyan novelist and playwright, is the post/colonial writer who has arguably done the most to assert gestic principles and bear witness to the differend. In that sense, he is a philosopher: ‘One’s responsibility before thought consists . . . in detecting differends and in finding the (impossible) idiom for phrasing them. This is what a philosopher does. An intellectual is someone who helps forget differends, by advocating a given genre, whichever one it may be . . . for the sake of political hegemony’.<sup>446</sup> If catharsis displaces differends and helps forget them, then *gestus* has the aim of causing them to appear.<sup>447</sup>

As David Lloyd writes, ‘The prohibitive function of power constitutes the subject as always in relation to an abandonment of potential relations that can only be retrospectively realised from the position of the subject’.<sup>448</sup> Helping forget differends is a means of obliterating other possibilities, other worlds, and other ‘potential relations’ that are less violent. Though Ngugi seemingly had to become a fully-fledged subject of post/colonial capital in order to realise retrospectively what he had lost, it was with breathtaking gestic finality that he enacted a *reversal* of that baleful trajectory (baleful because it is so effective at forgetting differends). Ngugi rejected his white name, ‘James’, and replaced it with ‘wa Thiong’o’. He retracted his conversion to Christianity. He attempted to undo the prolonged mission-school mentality in which he was groomed for his

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<sup>444</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Vol. I*, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 133.

<sup>445</sup> Žižek, *Plague of Fantasies*, 11.

<sup>446</sup> Lyotard, *Differend*, 142.

<sup>447</sup> Several writers in Ireland have repeated, or even in the case of Michael Hartnett, slightly anticipated, Ngugi’s switch to his indigenous language, but they have done so with catharsis in mind—specifically their own, but by implication, the ‘spiritual cleansing’ of the nation as well. Hartnett, for example, seems quite oblivious to the differend, writing, ‘My main and most simple reason for changing to Gaelic is that I love the language (I have no interest in *Connradhs*, *Cumanns*, *Coimisiuns* or churches)’. And also: ‘I suppose I did solve, for myself, a problem besetting many poets writing in Ireland. I “realised my identity” and came to terms with it’. Hartnett, ‘Why Write in Irish?’ *Irish Times* (August 26, 1975), 8. Nuala Ní Dhomnaill is even more concerned with ‘innermost being’: ‘I had chosen my language, or more rightly, perhaps, at some deep level, the language had chosen me. If there is a level to our being that for want of any other word for it I might call “soul” (and I believe there is), then for some reason that I can never understand, the language that my soul speaks, and the place it comes from, is Irish. At sixteen, I had made my choice. And that was that. It still is. I have no other. Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, ‘Why I Choose to Write in Irish: The Corpse that Sits Up and Talks Back’, in *Representing Ireland: Gender, Class, Nationality*, ed. Susan Shaw Sailer (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1997), 48.

<sup>448</sup> Lloyd, *Irish Times*, 27.

would-be career in colonial administration. He folded himself back into the peasant community from which he was severed as a (because a) promising child, especially with the Kamiriithu people's theatre experiment in which he was deeply immersed when arrested by the neo-colonial Kenyan state. He refused, finally, as a culmination of this reversal, to compose in English. It was as if he removed as best he could the very scars, markings, insignia and epistemic moorings of colonisation. As a *gestus*, moreover, it implied if others followed suit, the 'restoration' of a desolated discourse genre was imminently possible.

If 'what is at stake . . . is to bear witness to differends by finding idioms for them,' then Gikuyu is not the preformed idiom. Rather it is in the conspicuous *shift* from an imperial language to an indigenous one that *gestus* may find its materialisation, because what is being signified is not the golden age of the past but a repressive (neo)-colonial social relation. The shift itself is the entirety of the content. The switch to Gikuyu forces the differend to surface. That is why further 'explanations' of Ngugi's farewell, in English, in this genre of discourse, seem flimsy and run aground. This is because the shift is between discourse genres and it measures the rapacious subsumption of one by the other; the shift is not a nativist affirmation nor is it a cathartic 'understanding'—it is the woeful gap in between the two where violence that must be spoken remains unspeakable. If Ngugi is not, cannot be, a pure witness, still his shift, his *gestus*, is nevertheless pure differend. Ngugi stages this paradox of one who has suffered catastrophe and in the process been robbed of the discourse genre in which to tell it.

Almost everyone misunderstands or maligns him. But this is almost how it must be until the differend to which he bears witness is rendered explicit. If Ngugi's actions, motivations, intentions, meanings could be fully 'explained' then this would amount to a catharsis, such that the drama of his farewell would reveal his 'innermost being'. It would, as in all Aristotelian drama, have the 'object of driving the hero into spiritual conflicts'. But *gestus* thwarts this emotional discharge and Ngugi knows this. It is why he says, there will be no 'national accolades' and no 'new-year honours' for him.<sup>449</sup> Simon Gikandi and others cannot fathom Ngugi because his commitments (to a dispossessed peasantry) risk—indeed, in some ways promise—his own discursive erasure. Like Myles Joyce, Ngugi speaks the language of peasants and workers, a language that is therefore not 'audible' at the bar of global opinion. Not only that, but Ngugi's actions contain an implicit affront to the rest of us, for 'how can you establish what is not without criticizing what is?'<sup>450</sup> The *gestus* demonstrates that our (victorious) idiom did not 'deserve' to win, it was victorious only because it was the more unexpectedly brutal. Ngugi becomes ever the sorry plaintiff for whom the 'author of the damages turns out directly or indirectly to be one's judge'.<sup>451</sup>

As a 'plaintiff' he is responsible for proving that there *was* a discourse genre that now is gone. But it being gone, how is he to do that? 'The plaintiff lodges his or her complaint before the tribunal, the accused argues in such a way as to show the inanity of the accusation'.<sup>452</sup> ('That was not culture; that was savagery, backwardness, etc'.) And Lyotard continues

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<sup>449</sup> Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind: the Politics of Language in African Literature* (London: James Currey Ltd., 1981), 30.

<sup>450</sup> Lyotard, *Differend*, 9.

<sup>451</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>452</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.



You neutralise the addressor, the addressee, and the sense of the testimony; then everything is as if there were no referent (no damages.) If there is nobody to adduce the proof, nobody to admit it, and/or if the argument which upholds it is judged to be absurd, then the plaintiff is dismissed, the wrong he or she complains of cannot be attested. . . . If he or she persists in invoking this wrong as if it existed, the others (addressor, addressee, expert commentator on the testimony) will easily be able to make him or her pass for mad.<sup>453</sup>

The only other people who could ‘adduce the proof’ and ‘admit it’ along with Ngugi are the same ones who now occupy positions of authority in the post/colonial Kenyan state, that is, his classmates at Alliance High School and Makerere University, i.e., the Anglophone comprador elite. It is easy to make Ngugi pass for mad. He is called a ‘tribalist’, an ‘essentialist’, a ‘fetishist’ and a ‘prisoner’, an ‘ethnic chauvinist’, a ‘Gikuyu imperialist’<sup>454</sup> and a falsifier of history.<sup>455</sup> When Ngugi tries to register the scale of continuing violence, he is dismissed as either personally bitter or hopelessly nostalgic. From almost every possible quarter he is disowned. The simplest thing in the world to say is: what differend?

iv.

All colonial conquest is at least partly an enterprise of signs—without signs, we would not be able to speak meaningfully of colonisation at all, but merely of raiding, piracy, or primitive accumulation. It is only with the successful manipulation of signs that a state of affairs resembling colonisation arises, and furthermore, only when the reproduction of those same signs is effected by the colonised themselves that colonisation becomes recognisable as such.

Chinua Achebe speaks of the illimitable capacity of English to be indigenised. English, as a universal language, Achebe believes, can be faithful to all traditions. It can allow for any contingency and express any multiplicity. Yet the apparent capacity of English to neutralise every incommensurability is not something phenomenal about English or world languages in general but is rather constitutive of a specific strategy in the colonial-capitalist genre of discourse. Indeed Lyotard also describes the ‘economic genre of discourse’ (capitalism) as that which best pretends to universality, that which ‘seems able to admit all others’. He writes, ‘The differends between phrase regimens or genres of discourse are judged to be negligible by the tribunal of capitalism’.<sup>456</sup> English is capacious, just like capitalism. But is the insistence on the fruitful potential for the indigenisation of English not simply another way to say that there are not discourse genres plural, but only one? To say that there are not genres of discourse is also to say that there are no differends. All is litigation.

The differend is not substantial. It resists even words. It finds no litigious phrasing and no courtroom in which to ‘have its day’. It is confined to searing traces, asking to be remembered. Because the differend signals ruin, it is amongst the ruins that we will have to look for the possibilities unrealised in other discourse genres, other worlds. David Lloyd writes, as if with a ‘peasant language’ or the differend in mind:

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<sup>453</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>454</sup> Kwame Anthony Appiah says he disagrees with this appellation. See his ‘Topologies of Nativism’ in *In My Father’s House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 4.

<sup>455</sup> See Chinua Achebe, ‘Politics and Politicians of Language in African Literature’ in *The Education of a British-Protected Child* (London, Penguin, 2009).

<sup>456</sup> Lyotard, *Differend*, 178.

After all, one is inevitably rooting through the shards and remnants of spent lives and of ways of living that the ongoing process of progress and development has consigned to the rubbish heap, tracing the contours of things whose value both in use and in exchange has evaporated, listening for voices and waiting for ghosts. Out of such remainders, no consoling narrative is likely to emerge laden with the promise of future redemption. On the contrary, only in the most unpromising of materials, in the waste of which no use can be made, can one decipher the traces of the unsubsumed.<sup>457</sup>

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<sup>457</sup> Lloyd, *Irish Times*, 7.

## Naming the Conjuncture: Concluding Remarks on Materiality and Language

### i.

In the previous chapters, I have explored a number of texts that investigate the potential of indigenous languages (namely Irish) to challenge the hegemony of post/colonial, Anglophone social relations in particular and global capital in general. From O'Hara's satirical pieces and Coetzee's mute Friday to the Dirty Protests and the semiotic conquest of the New World, I have sought to show that language is far from neutral or immaterial. The philosophical dream of a transcendental meaning and a pure signified is necessarily shorn of context. What these texts demonstrate then is the obscured violence inherent to such (imperial) aspirations. What stitches these disparate forms together is a visceral sense of the manner in which violence constitutes the inaugural moment of capital, and an abiding preoccupation with the means by which the language of capital secures its dominance only by a perpetual effacement of this moment. Capital renders the present transparent by occulting the past. These texts are distinguished in the end by the ways they resurrect the past, a past in which different forms of social existence appeared not only possible, but *viable*, and so explode not only the apparent innocence of the present, but its seeming inevitability—thereby hinting at alternate modes of living that could exist beyond the orb of capital.

David Lloyd speaks of 'the historical role of the state in negating cultural formations that are articulated through contiguity or locality rather than through 'imaginary' relations of identity expressed in terms of abstract space and . . . 'empty, homogenous time'. The capitalist state seeks to displace such practices and replace them with 'symbolic identifications that mediate the relation of the individual subject with the nation; to subordinate the axis of metonymy, with its subversive and unregulated movements of contagion, rumour, and dissemination, to that of metaphor that subsumes difference into identity; to supplant the modalities of the oral community with those of civil society and with the practices of written documentation and codified rationalisation that sustain the governmental apparatus of modernity'.<sup>458</sup>

One such local, contiguous practice in Northern Ireland encapsulates the threat to capitalist modernity of the non-subjective, non-metaphorical speech situation.

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Steve McQueen's acclaimed 2008 film, *Hunger*, opens onto a black screen and a soundtrack of cacophonous noise. The following words appear: 'Northern Ireland 1981. 2187 people have been killed in 'The Troubles' since 1969'. The clanging sound is multiple and diffuse, difficult to identify, at once a hailstorm pounding a tin roof, and a demonic factory-works in full production. Its pulse is both machinic and frenzied. More words appear—'The British government has withdrawn the political status of all paramilitary prisoners'—while patterns in the sound-scape seem to coalesce before collapsing back into plangent dissonance. 'Irish Republicans in the Maze prison are on a "blanket" and "no wash" protest'. The camera cuts to a close-up of the source of the clangour: one of many metal bin-lids striking and re-striking the pavement in spasmodic percussion, before cutting to a medium shot of a girl in late childhood, staring straight ahead, her brow knitted in concentration as her whole body shakes with the vehemence of her effort. The camera cuts back to the bin-lid, but the rapid-fire movement and the street-light glinting off both metal and wet asphalt, cause the visual

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<sup>458</sup> David Lloyd, *Irish Culture and Colonial Modernity*, 158.

elements of the shot to jump and blur. The sight is no more isolatable than the audio and both give way to an indiscernible sense of convulsive urgency. Cut to the word ‘hunger’ and the sound abruptly stops.

The banging of bin-lids, most often in Catholic, nationalist areas of urban Northern Ireland, exhibited several ‘linguistic’ functions, though the most straightforward was to alert the community that British troops or RUC officers were encroaching upon the neighbourhood, likely with the aim of raiding and interning suspected insurgents. (The journalist Tim Pat Coogan also tells of a high-pitched cry which he likens to keening alongside the banging of bin-lids, pots and pans, and whistle blowing.) As of 9 August, 1971, the Stormont government resumed an internment law that allowed authorities to raid residences, arrest suspects and detain them without trial for indefinite periods of time. On the first day of the activation of this internment law, 300 suspects were detained in pre-dawn raids.<sup>459</sup> Deployed in order to warn those who were concealing fugitives or illegal weapons caches, or to impel the fugitives to flee, the banging of the bin-lids comprised a collaborative and polysemic ‘speech act’. Upon hearing a bin-lid banging, the understood injunction was to go out and ‘answer’ it, since in this way, the noise would swell beyond the immediate area and warn persons as far as several streets away.<sup>460</sup> ‘Designed to expand quickly’, anyone hearing her neighbours bang the bin-lids ‘was expected to move to the street in front of her house to join in the clamour’.<sup>461</sup> The practice provoked a spatial ‘re-territorialisation’ and followed a simple call-and-response pattern which anyone (men, women, children, the elderly) could heed. The call convened the community, and it moved them into the street. It was a sonic action and in important respects a ‘linguistic’ intervention as well.

How can simple noise-making be likened to language? In what way is banging a bin-lid a linguistic intervention? The profound materiality of language is often overlooked because of presumptions we carry about its ‘transparency’ and its basis as the conveyance of non-material ideas. As Richard Rorty has noted, however, language can only be instantiated in either ‘marks or noises’.<sup>462</sup> (It enjoys no purely mentalist realm.) In fact, bin-lid banging shares a number of the presuppositions of a materialist philosophy of language as elaborated by Deleuze and Guattari, Althusser, and Lenin (as brilliantly synthesised by Jean-Jacques Lecercle). In the following concluding remarks, I look to the practice of bin-lid banging in order to explore both the materiality of language, language as behaviour, and the (linguistic) mobilisation of bodies toward political ends. In order to summarise and reiterate the themes of this dissertation, I examine the ‘marks and noises’ of ‘Troubles’-era praxes in order to elaborate the relationship between material culture, the ‘rough music’ depicted in McQueen’s opening sequence, and the politicised speech community.

The Subaltern Studies collective have produced sophisticated research on ‘subaltern’ networks of communication through the idiom of ‘rumour’ and its role in the spread of insurgency amongst peasants in colonial India. Ranajit Guha writes of the ‘anonymous verbal signal [which] helped not merely to frighten those against whom a particular insurrection or jacquerie was directed, but above all, to spread the message of revolt

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<sup>459</sup> ‘NI Activates Internment Law’. 9 August 1971.

[http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/august/9/newsid\\_4071000/4071849.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/august/9/newsid_4071000/4071849.stm) accessed 02/04/2012.

<sup>460</sup> See Eleanor Owicki, ‘Rattle Away at your Bin: Women, Community, and Bin Lids in Northern Irish Drama’, Theatre Symposium, Vol. 18: The Prop’s the Thing: Stage Properties Reconsidered (Tuscaloosa: AL, University of Alabama Press, 2010) 56-66.

<sup>461</sup> Ibid., p. 58.

<sup>462</sup> Richard Rorty, *Contingency, irony, and solidarity*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 15.

among the people'.<sup>463</sup> 'The solidarity generated thus by the "uncontrollable" force of its transmission' is also pertinent to the contagion of bin-lid banging in the North of Ireland, a practice that itself emerged out of a matrix of community empathy, class-based vulnerability, and susceptibility to colonial bureaucracy. Megan Sullivan argues that bin-lid banging arose in the 1950's in response to unannounced housing inspections on low-income estates. It provided a means of alerting the neighbours when an inspector was spotted on the premises. Feared for their ability to dispense fines and impose punishments and disliked for their 'unpleasant demeanour', an incursion of housing officials could occasion a flurry of bin-lid banging as a form of advanced warning.<sup>464</sup> Its status as a working-class practice is established from its outset, and the resurgence of bin-lid banging during the 'Troubles' accords with its prevalence in the nationalist ghettos of west Belfast and Derry in particular. The ritual has been memorialised in several popular culture venues including the folk ballad, 'The Lid of Me Granny's Bin', which encourages members of the assailed community to 'raise an awful din' because 'the Brits is comin' in'. Its lyrics recognise the power of subaltern networks to operate 'beneath' the superior technology that the enemy has at his disposal and for information to travel quickly and effectively despite its 'primitive' methods. The song also acknowledges the power differential at play between a weaker guerrilla insurgency and the resources of an imperial military apparatus: 'The English have the telly, the radio and press./ To all communications, they've always had access./ But from Pettigo to Bellaghy, from the bone to Castlefin,/The only way to spread the news, is to rattle your granny's bin'.<sup>465</sup>

Deleuze would argue, furthermore, that 'rumour' does not constitute a contaminated sub-discourse, but is in fact the form taken by all language. Language is always 'hearsay' because it has no identifiable origin: 'Language is not content to go from a first party to a second party, from one who has seen to one who has not, but necessarily goes from a second party to a third party, neither of whom has seen'.<sup>466</sup> The anonymous relay is not unique to rumour or to bin-lid banging but is constitutive of all language, according to Deleuze. In rumour, the distinction between communicator and audience is untenable; rather the message itself moves 'from a teller to a hearer who himself becomes a teller'.<sup>467</sup> In this sense, all speech is 'reported speech' and all language is indirect discourse. Thus the lateral transmission of subaltern rumour becomes a model for language as such, rather than the 'privileged example' of dialogue. Dialogue presumes 'the so-called communication of direct verballity, of two immediately self-present sources or "authors"'.<sup>468</sup> Like rumour in the subaltern context, bin-lid banging and other insurgent speech, according to Spivak, 'evokes comradeship because it belongs to every "reader" or "transmitter"'. No one is its origin or source. Thus rumour is not error but primordially (originarily) errant, always in circulation with no assignable source. This illegitimacy makes it accessible to insurgency'.<sup>469</sup>

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<sup>463</sup> Ranajit Guha, *Elementary aspects of peasant insurgency in colonial India* (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 1999), 254-5.

<sup>464</sup> Megan Sullivan, *Women in Northern Ireland: cultural studies and material conditions* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1999), 53.

<sup>465</sup> Joe Mulhearn, 'The Lid of Me Granny's Bin.' [http://www.theballadeers.com/lyrics\\_12.htm](http://www.theballadeers.com/lyrics_12.htm) accessed 31/03/12.

<sup>466</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 85. Hence they write, 'There are many passions in a passion, all manner of voices in a voice, murmurings, speaking in tongues: that is why all discourse is indirect, and the translative movement proper to language is that of indirect discourse'. Ibid.

<sup>467</sup> Rumour is not 'sealed off by any "final signified" emanating from a "primal source", but is rather a "chain of reactions"' (Guha quoted in Lloyd). Lloyd points to its 'metonymic mode of transmission—by contiguity rather than from source to receiver'. *Irish Culture and Colonial Modernity*, 148.

<sup>468</sup> Gayatri Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*. London: Routledge, 1987. p. 214.

<sup>469</sup> Ibid., 213.

Bin-lid banging follows the rhizomes and tendrils of rumour or gossip and traverses the same spaces: 'Beside banging lids in the confrontational space of the street, the other spaces for this performance are the backyards and connecting alleyways behind the brick houses, which are also the customary spaces for women's networks and for gossip'.<sup>470</sup> As a means to de-territorialise and re-territorialise the nationalist areas and its spaces and praxes of insurgency, the British army painted the walls black up to a certain height so that their black Saracens (armoured cars) could patrol the nationalist areas relatively undetected. They entered the ghettos with blackened faces and upon initiating a raid they would smash the street-lights. (Coogan argues that in the 1920's, the B-Specials or 'murder gangs' would also blacken their faces and invade the Falls Road areas in stockinged feet, the better to enter and exit undetected: 'They loomed up out of the darkness to shoot a passer-by dead on the street or to hurl a hand grenade through a window, escaping like phantoms'.<sup>471</sup>) The depth and intensity of blackness was such that the British soldiers became effectively invisible.<sup>472</sup> The foot patrols were also lost in blackness. The Falls Road community took to repainting the walls white and hurling white paint bombs at the Saracens. As one observer stated, 'Our crowd started going out and painted all the black walls white. The Brits would repaint them black. This was going on for weeks, black/white, black/white, back and forth. The British army retaliated by firing water cannons into people's houses followed by black paint'.<sup>473</sup> If stealth had been the goal, then bin-lid banging was the apex of its subversion: 'The women would come out with pots, spoons, and bin-lids, banging them and following behind the Brits. The noise was everywhere. You always knew when the Brits were raiding through the districts'.<sup>474</sup> White paint, but more so bin-lids, and pots and spoons, were objects ready to hand that could be used instrumentally to protect the community. As I have argued throughout this dissertation, imperialism is a semiotic event and thus so will insurgency be inordinately semiotic.

## ii.

Drawing on the famous pamphlet written by Lenin, 'On Slogans' (1917)—and Deleuze and Guattari's reading of that text in *A Thousand Plateaus*, and another unattributed text rumoured to have been written by Louis Althusser—Jean-Jacques Lecercle lays out the tenets of a new materialist philosophy of language. Of this schema, there are approximately five main aspects: context, performativity, correctness, truth, and politics. Though writing chiefly on Lenin's theory of slogans, Lecercle adds that we mean not so much individual slogans, as 'an articulated set that justly names the moment of the conjuncture'.<sup>475</sup> Firstly, Lecercle develops 'a concept of *meaning* (an utterance) that is bound up with the conjuncture in which the utterance is produced' and which is thus inseparable from that context if it is to retain meaning.<sup>476</sup> Banging bin-lids produces meaning that is not transferable outside the context in which it is created, but which is entangled there. I cannot bang a bin-lid in a different milieu (i.e., early morning, West London) and expect to forge the same meaning. Hence the meaning of the utterance is totally reliant on its occurrence at the intersection of the socio-cultural and historical

<sup>470</sup> Allen Feldman, *Formations of Violence*, 97.

<sup>471</sup> Tim Pat Coogan, *The IRA* (London: Harper Collins, 2000), 162.

<sup>472</sup> Feldman, *Formations of Violence*, 94.

<sup>473</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>474</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>475</sup> Lecercle, 'Lenin the Just, or Marxism Unrecycled', *Lenin Reloaded: Toward a Politics of Truth*, eds. Sebastian Budgen, Stathis Kouvelakis, and Slavoj Žižek (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 279.

<sup>476</sup> Jean-Jacques Lecercle, *A Marxist Philosophy of Language*, trans. Gregory Elliott (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2009), 97-8.

forces out of which it emerges. In this materialist philosophy of language, therefore, we could not speak of universal meaning.

Secondly, bin-lid banging carries no substantive descriptive content but rather intervenes in a conjuncture, or as Lecercle writes, ‘An utterance is not the description of a state of affairs within a conjuncture, but an *intervention* in the conjuncture: it reflects but also helps to alter, the balance of forces that gives it its meaning’.<sup>477</sup> There is no cause for interpretation upon hearing the sound of banging bins, but only immediate response. Whereas we would normally anticipate the lag of interpretation implicit in the displacements of metaphor, in bin-lid banging, there is no deferral. As with the semiotics of the Dirty Protest, the meaning of the speech act inheres in the performance itself. It is language, as Deleuze has argued, not as metaphor but as metamorphosis. The form *is* the content and vice versa. Lenin, moreover, recalls that the etymology of slogan is ‘war-cry’. A ‘war-cry’ is not an objective description, so much as a performative, acting upon its recipients in such a way as to marshal force, not (simply) reflect it. Bodies—accumulating on the street, each one engaged in a clamorous speech act—alter the balance of forces by disorientating military objectives and scattering suspected targets.

Thirdly, banging the bin-lids is ‘correct’. (The concept of ‘correctness’ was critical to Althusser in his analyses of Lenin on the conjuncture.) It is ‘correct’ insofar as it accurately assesses the situation by simultaneously designating the danger and moving the hearers to act. Lecercle writes, ‘There is a reflexive circularity between the slogan which names the moment of the conjuncture and the conjuncture that allows it to make sense. The conjunctural character of meaning is the content of the concept of correctness’. Because it is ‘correct’ and it works, so is it ‘true’. Banging the bin-lids avails the besieged community of vital knowledge of the state of struggle and at the same time proffers instruction. This identification of both impending threat and the political task at hand produces the ‘truth’ of the situation. Because banging the bin-lids is ‘correct’ so is it also the truth, its activity a form of truth-telling to one another. Thus Lecercle states: ‘An appropriate slogan is not true but correct . . . The word ‘truth’ is nevertheless used by Lenin . . . But this ‘truth’ is strictly dependent on the correctness of slogans; it is an effect, if not an affect, of this correctness’.<sup>478</sup> Finally, it is a political performative because it lays out the coordinates of struggle according to class forces, (anti-) imperialist forces and nationalist forces and materially intervenes in them. Throughout this dissertation, all of my examples of materialist speech acts have resonated with banging bin-lids. Each belongs to an instance of semiotic weaponry that transforms not merely the meaning of the utterances but the very context of understanding. By recalling once again the genesis of the context in violence, they also supply the means to alter this inheritance and interrupt its continued incarnations.

Deleuze and Guattari are especially interested in Lenin’s pamphlet because he shows how the correct naming of the conjuncture (i.e., the slogan) actually ‘anticipates the political body that it organises’. According to Deleuze and Guattari, ‘the power of the slogan is not only performative, it is constitutive of the class that it summons into existence’.<sup>479</sup> The implication here is that Marx understood that there is no ‘proletariat’ in pre-existence, but only a mass of workers with the potential to form a proletariat. The proletariat will have to be called forth from that undifferentiated mass—interpellated in order to be actualised as such. To a great degree, this is what Marx himself was doing in his own work—naming, and thus calling into being, this ‘proletariat’.

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<sup>477</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>478</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>479</sup> Ibid., 99.

The work of the slogan is to name the conjuncture with such clarity and precision—such ‘correctness’—that a class is called into being who will make revolution, and that class is called *by name*, in such a way that they cannot not respond. ‘Slogans,’ Lecercle argues, ‘are always collective, and their meaning derives not from their author’s political genius (for they have no author, not even Lenin) but from their capacity to intervene in the conjuncture they analyse, but also, in naming it, to call it into being’.<sup>480</sup> This is the work of the ‘slogan’, and we can already see glimpses of its force amongst the bin-lids.

Those who are otherwise connected through little more than deprivation, the inhabitants of West Belfast, are called forward to become defenders of a community—they *become* that community—with a call they do not (cannot?) resist. It is a perfect ‘slogan’ because it is a condensed, intelligible embodiment of the distribution of power relations in a given conjuncture, and it interpellates a group who know precisely what to do (the political task at hand) and how to do it. It is partly spontaneous and partly choreographed, but it is ‘true’ because it works. Banging the bin-lids inverts the quietude of stealth and internment; insurgent cacophony exposes the violent mechanisms of capitalist militarism, even in its performance of ‘peace-keeping’. In order for the encoding of capital to become operative, it has to first efface its own violence and drive it underground. Bin-lid banging interrupts the requirements of stealth and by extension, the subterranean violence of capitalist social relations. It meets this violence head-on with a melee that displays its own formidability (it would ‘frighten those against whom a particular insurrection or jacquerie was directed’) and its commitment to damming the flows of perpetual, exogenous violence.

Throughout this dissertation, I have suggested that political language has the task of naming the conjuncture. I have also been concerned to show that the deployment of indigenous language in an Anglophone context may be an effective means to do just that. Bobby Sands knew, perhaps better than anyone, that this was a possibility, and the phrase he coined in the H-Blocks, *Tiocfaidh ár lá*, was to circulate after his death as an actual slogan. Can the speaking of Irish *on its own* produce the effects that Lenin theorised? Speaking a form of Irish in the pre-colonial period would not have been of interest because it is what everyone else spoke, too. Speaking Irish in a militarised site of colonial occupation has a meaning that arises from its juxtaposition with an imperial replacement language. In the chapter, ‘Bad Subjects’, I attempted to show the contextual and relational nature of belligerent spoken Irish and the language of occupation, English. In the chapter on Daniel O’Hara’s short films, I showed how speaking Irish in an unauthorised post/colonial context (the Republic) also produced anxiety. Though this tension is rendered in humorous terms by O’Hara, rather than the volatile and violent terms of answering an English-language hail in Irish, there are similarities. Both highlight and grapple with a negated language. Even O’Hara’s remarkable wit cannot remove the traces of palpable loss.

Secondly, I have rejected the idea that description takes precedence over intervention. Much of the debate on post/colonial writing has to do with how well an indigenised imperial language can ‘describe’ the post/colonial experience. I have suggested that ‘description’ in this sense displaces intervention and indulges in a kind of subjective catharsis. In my chapter on ‘Conquest and Signs’ I argued that the content of Ngũgĩ’s writings in Gikuyu were less important than the (linguistic) form they took. This is because the fact that he had switched to Gikuyu was all that was required to invoke a breath-taking *gestus* in an Anglophone neo-colonial conjuncture. That he enlivened the novel form in African literature is a fortunate by-product of what is unmistakably an intervention. *Gestus*, as opposed to catharsis, is that operation whereby an oppressive social

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<sup>480</sup> Lecercle, ‘Lenin the Just’, 279-80.



relation is exposed and decried in a spectacular fashion. Catharsis is the disavowal of those relations, often through a 'beautiful' subjective discharge. Bin-lid banging cannot be cathartic because it is not beautiful, but unnerving, loud, and intimidating.

Speaking Irish in the H-Blocks, meanwhile, is 'correct'. It is correct because it interpellated an eschatological community out a group of young men (and women at Armagh) in a desperately brutal situation. It named the conjuncture as a colonial war-zone and told the collective how to proceed. When one H-Block inmate spoke to another in Irish, this act alone named the (anti-colonial) struggle and proffered a task, which was to answer back. Because most of the inmates did not know the language well enough to 'answer back', they embarked on immersive auto-didacticism to the exclusion of almost everything else. And as I suggested in the chapters on the H-Blocks, this was not a prelude to socio-political transformation, but the transformation itself. The definition of revolution—and we can see Bobby Sands and the other prisoners awakening to this understanding—would amount to a state in which everyone 'answered back'. This resurrection of the Irish language speech community is foreshadowed in the banging of the bin-lids and in the Gaeltacht at Long Kesh. The combination of correctness and truth in the H-Blocks lead to an overwhelming desire by the inmates to 'tell this truth' to whomever was prepared to hear it on the outside of the prison, which relates to my explanation of the Hunger Strikes. Written about the same time as the Hunger Strikes, we can see that Friel's play does not show the distribution of political power and the coordinates of the state of struggle but obscures them. Despite its elements of the poetic and beautiful, Friel has seen that Irish is absent from the play, and thus the political task would seem to be to forget it.

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What names the conjuncture and assembles bodies will be retroactively 'correct' and in that sense it is difficult to know beforehand what the language (in all its respects) should be. As Lenin well knew, a slogan that is correct at one stage will be incorrect the next, which points to the reality of constant variation in the *rappports de force* of a given conjuncture and the need to adapt political language accordingly. Yet there would seem to be potential in the speaking of indigenous language in the Anglophone post/colony. Still, we must continually formulate and reformulate the name of the conjuncture in the dark, ever looking to find the 'correct' and therefore 'true' concatenation of phrases and bodies to call forth the group that will seize the conjuncture. This naming is a crucial part of remembering the horrors of the past. To literally *re-member*, as in to gather together again, is the Benjaminian fulcrum on which redeeming our 'enslaved ancestors' turns. What was an exhausted situation becomes—through a new figuration of language and a sudden shift of meaning—that call to revolution to which we cannot help but respond.

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